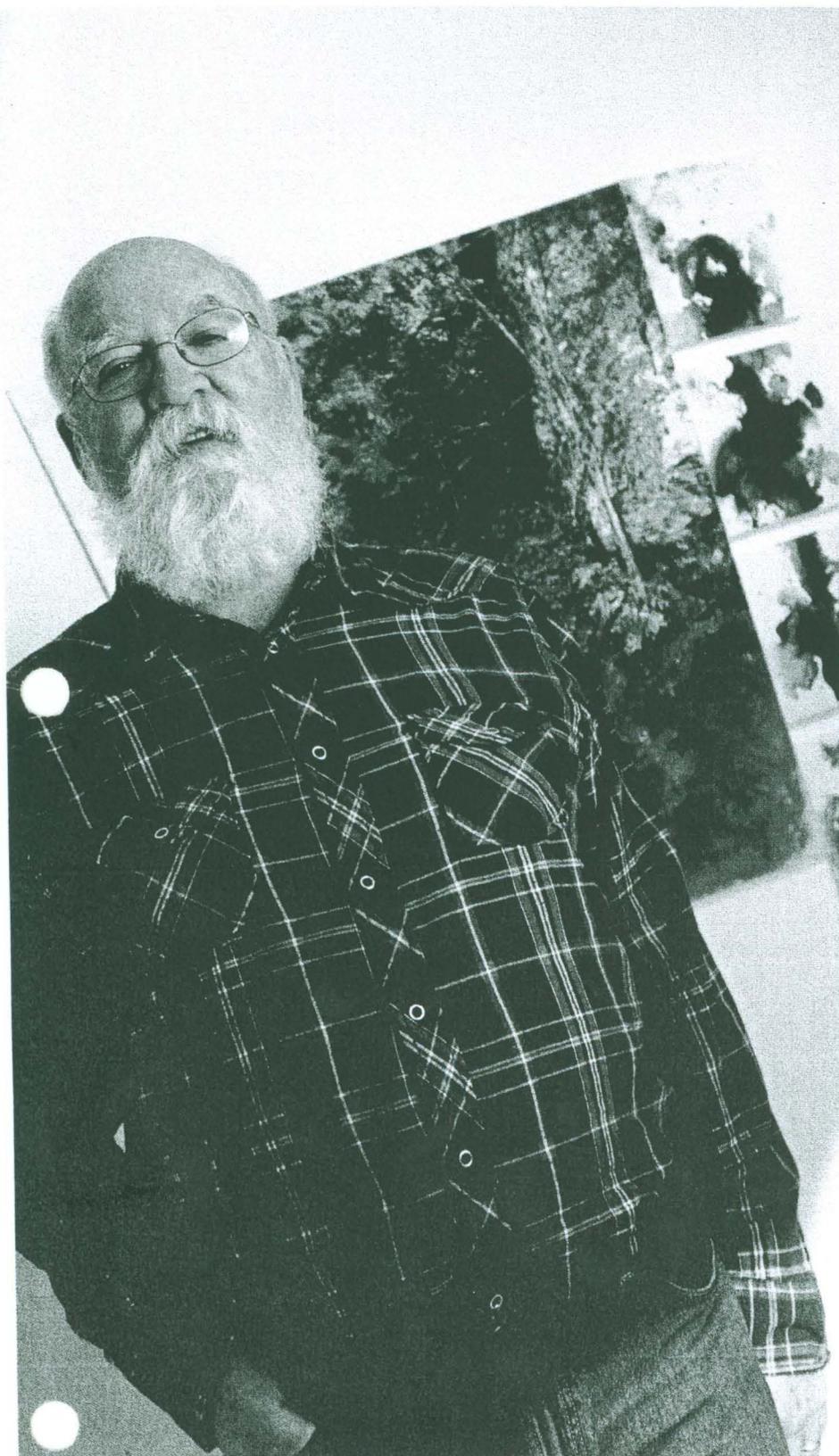


daniel dennett

the philosophical rabblrouser recharges his mind at SFI

interview by Devon Jackson



Renowned philosopher Daniel Dennett, a staunch Darwinian evolutionist whose lifelong interests focus on free will, consciousness, and basically how the mind works, and who has often spoken out on behalf of atheists and secularism, is the Santa Fe Institute's most recent Miller Scholar (SFI's most prestigious visiting position). Here through the summer, Dennett, the 68-year-old professor at Tufts University and author of *Consciousness Explained* and *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, among many other books and papers, took time out from his collaborative projects, reading(s), and cogitations to talk about humor, religion, atheist clergymen, and his love for Christmas hymns.

How do you like Santa Fe and the Institute so far?

This is my third or fourth visit here, but this will be the longest. My wife wanted to spend a few months in the Southwest, and it's a very good atmosphere here at SFI. There's a rather narrow band that's both rigorous and openminded and SFI hits that band well.

What have you been working on?

Several collaborations: a paper on free will; a book on humor, tentatively titled *Inside Jokes: Why and How Laughing Matters*; and a book on atheist clergymen.

Why humor?

Although every theory's right about something but no theory is right about everything, we have a unified theory of humor that puts it into a new computational model. We look at what's funny and why, how humor travels. The book uses brain evolution and cognitive models.

And will everyone get it? Will there be examples of what's funny and what's not?

Some humor's universal and some's hermetically sealed. Our theory is that any string of words or gestures in the setup is funny. But humor's not very portable. What is: short, narrative jokes, of which we have about 200—over half of which we analyze. Jokes from George Carlin, Steven Wright, Steve Martin, early P.G. Wodehouse. Comedians have been prospecting our brains for several thousand years and feeding our brains these cognitive drugs. They've learned how to turn people on.

Why are places like SFI so essential?

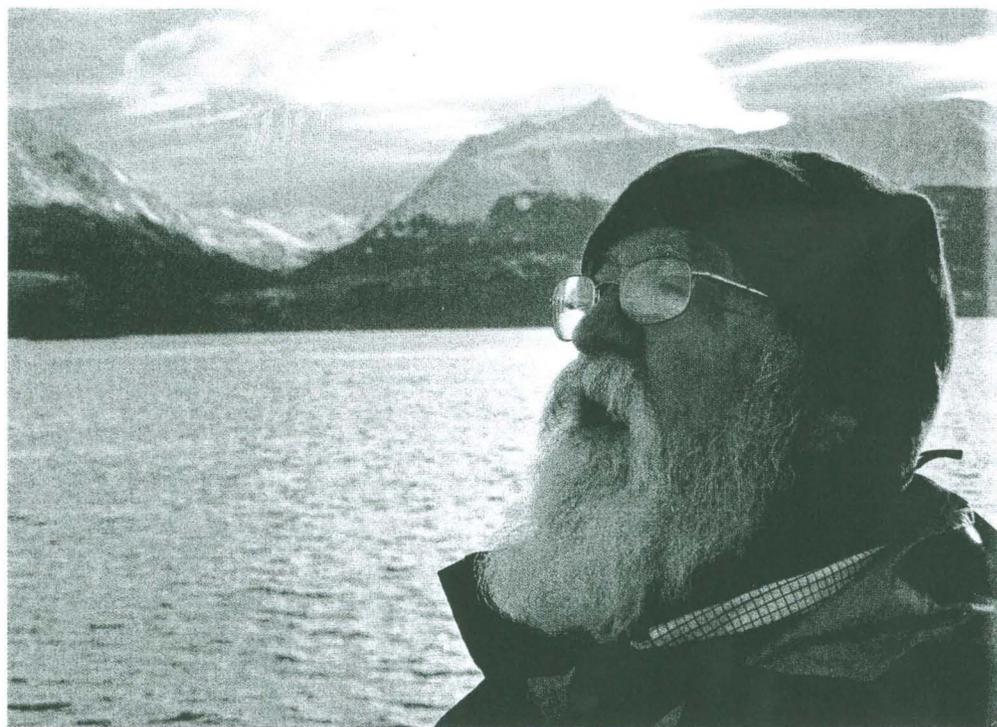
My horizons expand a lot here. There's very little garbage time—time chopped into bits too small to use. Here, you get to have as big a block of hours as you need. I'm also having a very good time talking with the other people here—physicists, biochemists, economists. A straight diet of philosophy is not for me. And it's sort of not the real world here. It's a time and place to focus furiously on one issue and then look over and say, That's an interesting book. I find myself waking up in the morning and thinking, and it's wonderful. My head is just teeming.

So have you scaled back on your advocacy of atheism?

Well, I've still got my fireman's hat on, just in case. But it was high time the stultifying reticence of atheism is over. There were so many more interesting things, but during the Bush years, the religious right became dangerous. So my position, it was not a labor of love but a labor of duty. And more people gained confidence and hope from finding public atheists. Besides, there are more of us than Mormons and Jews. It's time for politicians to start listening to us.

But aren't atheists by trait loners and not joiners?

There are two kinds. One kind—95 percent—for them atheism's not a big part of their lives. It's not a religion. They just walk away from it. For others—it's a mission. They proselytize; it's important there could be such people. I was one of the first category. And I could spend the rest of my



MATT RIDLEY

Daniel Dennett sailing up the Beagle Channel, at the extreme tip of South America, site of Charles Darwin's naturalist voyage.

life mopping up. Thankfully, there's some tag-team wrestling going on now.

With other atheists coming out, you mean—like Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris.

Right. But religion is so adept at ducking behind trees and coming out the other side. There's a lot of strategic backpedaling.

How atheistic are you then?

I'm a moderate. I don't think we should abolish religion. But it needs to morph. I get fed up with the systematic hypocrisy and honoring irrationality. As far as I know, there's no religion that doesn't harbor deep wells of irrationality. I'm all for the music and the passion—but without the lies.

So it's more a beef with belief—against rationality and reason.

Don't kid yourself, we're all dictated by emotions. Even mathematicians at their most lucidly, brilliantly rational are still dependent on emotions. But it's reason and evidence that'll settle the matter.

And what's the difference between science and religion? Or scientists and religionists?

Scientists don't wallow in the mystery. They don't protect it. The question to ask is: What if I'm wrong? Every now and then religionists accuse me of arrogance and

demand humility and modesty. But do they ever ask themselves, What if I'm wrong? They think it's wrong even to ask. And anyone who feels guilty of doubting their faith is a little feeble as a reasoner.

Is that what led to the book on atheist clergymen?

These men were so lonely. It was such a relief for them to have someone to talk to. And they're sure they're not alone. But they have no way of knowing. They went into the ministry with pure hearts and the best of intentions, but they got trapped in a situation where they know it really isn't true. The very training they get is often one that is very troubling to them.

Have you been doing much outside of your work at the Institute?

My wife and I have been to Shidoni, to Museum Hill, to the Indian Museum, which is simply outstanding. Madrid's an interesting Sunday morning jaunt.

And despite your stance on religion, you and your wife love Christmas hymns.

We love Christmas music. For about 30 years we've sung the real stuff. The neat, 100 percent religious stuff. We have a collection of Christmas hymns, we sing at Christmas concerts. It's incredibly gorgeous music. It's great. **SI**