Great Philosophers: Daniel Dennett

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A: Here's Pooh the teddy bear, thinking how nice it would be to have some honey for breakfast!

B: Wrong. The teddy bear has no provision for distinguishing honey from anything else. No operating sense organs, and not even a stomach. The teddy bear is filled with inert stuffing. It is not like anything to be a teddy bear.
Plan

Dennett’s life and works.
Dennett on doing philosophy.
On consciousness:
(1) Against the ‘Cartesian theatre’.
(2) Consciousness as a user-illusion (aka ‘illusionism’).
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Daniel Dennett (1942 – present)

Born 1942 in Boston, Massachusetts (Daniel Clement Dennett III).
PhD in Oxford (1965), supervised by Gilbert Ryle.
Currently based at Tufts University (Medford and Somerville, Massachusetts).

Works include:
Content and Consciousness (2nd ed., 1986)
The Intentional Stance (1987)
Consciousness Explained (1991)
Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking (2013)
From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds (2017)
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What type of philosopher is Dennett?

Dennett is trained as a philosopher (very broadly: trained to construct arguments in favour of a conclusion).

But his writing – especially his recent writing and his books – frequently draws on theories and findings from other fields of expertise. Such as: cognitive science, psychology (animal psychology, child psychology), biology, economics, and others.

Exemplified by his work on evolution.

‘Synthetic’ philosophy is contrasted with analytic philosophy, which has been dominant in English-speaking Europe and America since at least the beginning of the twentieth century.
Dennett as a ‘synthetic philosopher’

Analytic philosophy: concerned with clarity, precision, the logical structure of arguments.
Tends to involve carving up broad philosophical questions/domains of enquiry into much smaller questions and tackling them piecemeal.
If you’re an analytic philosopher, you might become an expert in a very narrow field of enquiry (language, ethics, metaphysics, etc.).
“By ‘synthetic philosophy’ I mean a style of philosophy that brings together insights, knowledge, and arguments from the special sciences with the aim to offer a coherent account of complex systems and connect these to a wider culture or other philosophical projects (or both).”*
Synthetic philosophy is closer to the ‘system-building’ of the Early Modern period (1600-1800) (and beyond).

If a question is asked, there should be an answer available somewhere in that system.

Synthetic answer (by means of a philosophical ‘system’ or a broad picture of reality).
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Dennett on doing philosophy

Dennett is generally a clear writer and is enthusiastic to communicate his views to a broad church (including non-philosophers).

“I have always figured that if I can’t explain something I’m doing to a group of bright undergraduates, I don’t really understand it myself, and that challenge has shaped everything I have written. Some philosophy professors yearn to teach advanced seminars only to graduate students. Not me… Philosophy written for one’s advanced graduate students and fellow experts is typically all but unreadable – and hence largely unread.”

“The middle ground, roughly halfway between poetry and mathematics, is where philosophers make their best contributions.” (2013, 12-13)
Dennett on doing philosophy

Emphasis on the *tools* employed by philosophers.

Labels: “Sometimes just creating a vivid name for something helps you keep track of it while you turn it around in your mind.”

Example Dennett does like: ‘Self’ vs. ‘selfy-self’.

Example Dennett doesn’t like: ‘qualia’.

Analogies and metaphors: “Mapping the features of one complex thing onto the features of another complex thing that you already (think you) understand.”

E.g. ‘the brain is like a computer.’

Intuition pumps: “little stories designed to provoke a heartfelt, table-thumping intuition – ‘Yes, of course, it has to be so!’ – about whatever thesis is being defended.” (2013, 4-6)*

*Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking (2013)
Dennett on doing philosophy

Philosophy as professional mistake-making.

“While other disciplines specialize in getting the right answers to their defining questions, we philosophers specialize in all the ways there are of getting things so mixed up, so deeply wrong, that nobody is even sure what the right questions are, let alone the answers.” (2013, 20)

“When the problem is difficult just blurt out an answer and then you’ll have something to try and fix.” (‘The Future of Life’, 2018)
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Consciousness Explained

Dennett sets out with a nice, easy task: to explain consciousness. But what exactly needs explaining?

Typical questions include:

- The relationship between the brain and the mind/our conscious selves.
- What it means to say of a being/organism ‘it is conscious’.
- How we know that another being/organism is conscious.
- What differentiates us from non-conscious animals (if there are any) and objects.
Myth-busting

One of Dennett’s chief aims is to de-bunk a particular myth about consciousness that has been with us since at least the 1600s (across multiple works, but I will focus on *Consciousness Explained*).

The myth of the ‘Cartesian theatre’ (or the ‘Cartesian wound’ that was inflicted upon philosophy of mind).
Myth-busting

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The myth of the ‘Cartesian theatre’ (or the ‘Cartesian wound’ that was inflicted upon philosophy of mind).

➢ The myth comes from Rene Descartes (1596-1650).

➢ The myth tells us that the ‘inside’ of the mind is like a theatre, where there’s (i) us/the self (the audience), and (ii) our conscious experiences (the show).
The Cartesian theatre

Conscious experience → Self ('mind’s eye')
Dennett wants us to reject the view that consciousness is some robust, genuine *thing* that needs explaining – and which bears a special, private relationship with a ‘self’. Sets out to de-mystify.

_First question: why did this picture come about?_
Descartes’ account

In the centre of the brain is the pineal gland.
• Straddles left and right hemispheres (‘seat of knowledge’).
• Unclear what purpose it serves (even today).

“Descartes proposed a role for it: in order for a person to be conscious of something, traffic from the senses had to arrive at this station, where it thereupon caused a special – indeed, magical – transaction to occur between the person’s material brain and immaterial mind.” (1991, 105)
Descartes’ account

The Cartesian theatre story of consciousness tells us:

“Wherever there is a conscious mind there is a point of view. This is one of the most fundamental ideas we have about minds – or about consciousness. A conscious mind is an observer, who takes in a limited subset of all the information there is.” (1991, 101)

Consciousness involves (i) an observer, and (ii) something observed.

One of the most widely accepted ideas we have about consciousness – but, Dennett thinks, it is wrong.

“Descartes, one of the first to think seriously about what must happen once we look closely inside the body of the observer, elaborated an idea that is so superficially natural and appealing that is has permeated our thinking ever since.” (1991, 104)
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➢ Very often it just feels like there is (i) myself, and (ii) my conscious experiences (but we need to get over that).
Descartes’ account

Descartes’ account has been pretty much unanimously rejected.
In fact, it was subjected to criticism right from the start.
Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia (1618-1680):

“I ask you please to tell me how the soul [mind] of a human being (it being only a thinking substance) can determine the bodily spirits, in order to bring about voluntary actions.” (Elisabeth to Descartes, 6th May 1643)

The pineal gland is meant to help us understand how the brain (a physical thing) interacts with the mind (a non-physical thing). But Descartes fails to explain how!
‘The Cartesian wound’

Dennett: Descartes’ account of the pineal gland as the seat of consciousness has been rejected, but the story of the Cartesian theatre still has a hold on us. Why? Because Descartes latched on to an idea that is intuitively appealing (he found a good ‘intuition pump’.)

“The idea of a special center of the brain is the most tenacious bad idea bedevilling our attempts to think about consciousness... it keeps reasserting itself in new guises, and for a variety of ostensibly compelling reasons.” (1991, 108)

“We must stop thinking of the brain as if it had such a functional summit or central point... it’s a bad habit.” (1991, 111)
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Consciousness Explained Away?

“Many scientists and philosophers conceive of the problem of consciousness as the challenge of working out how the brain produces the inner subjective world of consciousness. Dennett mockingly rejects this project as akin to wondering how the metaphysical reality of Hogwarts is produced by the letters on the page of J. K. Rowling’s novels. Consciousness, for Dennett, is an illusion conjured up by the information processing of the brain. The brain tricks us into thinking there is a magical inner world, just as the magician tricks us into thinking he has sawn a lady in half.”

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‘Illusionism’ about consciousness

_Not_ the view that our _experience_ of consciousness is an illusion (i.e. that we are all philosophical zombies).

*(Keith Frankish, ‘The Consciousness Illusion’)*

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Not the view that our experience of consciousness is an illusion (i.e. that we are all philosophical zombies).

(Our experience of consciousness is something like the Cartesian theatre.)

"In the movie The Matrix (1999), Morpheus offers Neo a red pill. If he takes it, he will discover that reality as he knows it is an illusion created by machine overlords to keep humans enslaved. I am going to offer you a different pill, which – if it works – will convince you that your own consciousness is a sort of illusion, a fiction created by your brain to help you keep track of its activities." (Keith Frankish, 'The Consciousness Illusion')*
Both A and B act the same way, but…

- Feelings (heat, cold, pain, pleasure)
- Emotions
- Fears
- Desires

Philosophical zombies
‘Illusionism’ about consciousness

Not the view that our experience of consciousness is an illusion (i.e. that we are all philosophical zombies).

Rather, the view that there is something illusory about our experience of consciousness – in other words, that there is a discrepancy between our experience (i.e., what I take it to be) of consciousness and what it is really is. (Our experience of consciousness is something like the Cartesian theatre.)

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Consciousness in *Bacteria to Bach and Back*

In this book, Dennett approaches the issue of human consciousness in relation to natural selection/evolution (the book is supposed to explain how human consciousness evolved).

Asks the question: *how do human beings achieve “global” comprehension using “local competences”?*

In other words, how is it that when you put together enough little bits of gray matter (which are themselves not conscious), you get consciousness?

‘The Hard Problem of Consciousness’.

How did human beings make the ‘leap’ to consciousness and why haven’t other animals?
Consciousness in *Bacteria to Bach and Back*

“Our ability to do this kind of thinking [the kind of thinking other animals don’t do*] is not accomplished by any dedicated brain structure not found in other animals.” (2017, 341)

*e.g. judgement, self-appreciation, planning-ahead, reasoning, etc.* Instead, it is because our brains (unlike the brains of other animals) provide us with a user interface.
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“an edited digest of our current [brain] activities” (2017, 344-45)

Dennett’s claim: the human brain (unlike other animal brains) makes readily available to its user(?) simplified, but nonetheless accurate, information about what it is doing.
User interface: ‘something that allows you to interact with a system which is otherwise too complicated to understand.’ (my definition)

Between me and the hardware on my laptop.

Between me and the inside of my iPhone.

Between me and the electricity in my home.
Why do we have a user interface?

In other words, why do we need to know what’s going on in the brain?

Dennett’s claim: the reason our brains have evolved to provide us with a user interface (and other animals’ haven’t) is because of our need to communicate with one another.

(Other animals have other ways of getting by without this one thing we’re good at.)

To get by (in a world where it’s survival of the fittest) I need to be able to tell you (e.g.) what I’m thinking, planning, scared of, hungry for, etc.

But I need to know first, before I can tell you.

So the brain has evolved to be fitted with a user interface.

I simply wouldn’t know otherwise: working out what I am thinking would be no easier than working out what stage in the digestion process my breakfast is at.

(As it turns out, I do have a kind of user-interface when it comes to my stomach: feelings of hunger.)
I’m scared.
Why do we have a user interface?

“When we evolved into an us, a communicating community of organisms that can compare notes, we became the beneficiaries of a system of user-illusions that rendered versions of our cognitive processes – otherwise as imperceptible as our metabolic processes – accessible to us for the purposes of communication.”

“We can give this strange idea an almost paradoxical spin: it is like something to be you because you have been enabled to tell us – or refrain from telling us – what it’s like to be you!” (2017, 344)
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Humans need to communicate their mental activities; natural selection (gradually) provides what is needed by organisms; humans evolve user interfaces for the brain; user interface tells us about our mental activities; in turn, we can then communicate them.
So why aren’t we all illusionists?

(1) The prevailing influence of the Cartesian theatre (the Cartesian wound is yet to be healed).

(2) Deliberate (or implicit) mystifying of consciousness.
“The human mind, many think, is the last bastion of what is sacred in this world, and to explain it would be to destroy it, so to be safe, we had better declare consciousness conveniently out of bounds to science.”

(3) Implications for AI.
What (I think) it all comes down to:

Is there a hard problem of consciousness?

Do we need to explain the relation between (i) consciousness, and (ii) the brain?

Can you get over the feeling that consciousness really exists?

Yes?
Illusionism might be for you.

No?
Other options:
Dualism (conscious mind and physical brain are real).
Panpsychism (everything is conscious, to some degree or another).
Thanks!

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