

Dennett, Daniel Clement

Daniel Clement Dennett (1942 -) did his first degree at Harvard, where, he tells us in Brainchildren p. 357, he vigorously resisted the most influential American philosopher of the 20th century, Willard van Orman Quine. He then did a D. Phil. in Oxford in a short two years under Gilbert Ryle, the most influential Oxford philosopher of his time, finishing in 1966. He is an expert high-seas sailor and an accomplished pianist and choral singer. He has taught at Tufts University for over thirty years.

His first book was Content and Consciousness (1969). These two words, ‘content’ and ‘consciousness’, encapsulate much of Dennett’s mission. ‘Content’ refers to the contents of the mind – all the beliefs and desires and values and emotions and hopes and expectations and memories and so forth that make up the mind. ‘Consciousness’ refers, of course, to ... consciousness. In Dennett’s view, the correct order in which to examine these topics is content first, then consciousness.

Content

Dennett’s next book was a collection of essays written during the ‘70s, Brainstorms. This work helped launch a unique publishing enterprise, Bradford Books. Founded by Harry and Betty Stanton and subsequently absorbed by MIT Press, the Bradford insignia has become one of the most important collections of books in philosophy of mind and cognitive science in the English language.

Brainstorms begins with the first full articulation of Dennett's distinctive approach to mental content, the approach that he calls the intentional stance. Says Dennett, we can approach something in order to explain it from three stances, the physical stance, the design stance, and the intentional stance. Each has its own advantages and costs but none is describing reality from the one correct perspective.

After editing a charming collection of works by others on the mind, The Mind's I, with Douglas Hofstadter (1981), Dennett next turned to decision-making and responsibility, in an idiosyncratic little book called Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting (1984). The book began life as John Locke Lectures in Oxford and puts forth a brisk compatibilism between decisions being causally determined and decisions being free in any way that is "worth wanting". Interestingly, he returned to the topic of free will nearly twenty years later in Freedom Evolves (2003).

The year 1987 saw his second major collection of papers on content, The Intentional Stance. The papers in this collection are probably the most influential papers that Dennett has written. Near the end of the collection are two papers on evolutionary theory, a topic that was to loom large in his thinking in the 1990s.

Dennett's work on mental content has led him to questions about artificial content (AI), the evolution of content, the relationship of content to the environment and brain (neuroscience), content in nonhumans (cognitive ethology), the nature of explanation in psychology and science generally, how content is represented and the different styles of mental representation, the relationship of representations to the brain, how we ascribe mental content to ourselves and others, and so on.

Consciousness

At this point Dennett turned to consciousness and a huge book, Consciousness Explained (1991), ensued. For the first time, Dennett wrote a book deliberately aimed at a wide audience. It would not be the last. Dennett laid out methods for studying consciousness, built a model of consciousness as a cognitive system, and discussed the nature of introspection (the consciousness we have of ourselves and our own mental states), how consciousness evolved, pathologies of consciousness such as Dissociative Identity Disorder (formerly Multiple Personality Disorder), whether there is any real difference between how a mental state functions in us and how it feels to us (what the philosophers call qualia or felt quality), what selves might be, the neural implementation of consciousness, and so on – just about every issue in connection with consciousness that one could think of.

This book has two main targets. One is the picture of conscious states that the tradition received from Descartes. This is the idea that there is something to a conscious state, some felt quality, that is unmistakably clear and clearly different from anything else in the world. The other is the what Dennett calls the Cartesian theatre, the idea that the conscious system is a kind of screen on which conscious states play before a little homunculus sitting in the middle of the theatre. To replace the Cartesian picture in both its parts, Dennett proposed what he calls a Multiple Drafts Model (MDM) of consciousness. MDM treats consciousness as a kind of mental contents, almost a matter of programming.

Dennett next wrote a shorter book pulling the two sides of his work together, Kinds of Minds (1996). Then finally he turned to a task that had been awaiting him for a long time,

evolutionary theory. Darwin's Dangerous Idea (1995) was also published as a trade book and also enjoyed phenomenal success. Here Dennett argues for two main claims:

1. Darwin's theory of evolution is a 'universal acid' that dissolves all manner of intellectual 'skyhooks' and other pseudoscientific props that philosophers (and not just philosophers) have dreamt up to try to patch up hopeless theories;

and yet,

2. Contrary to those who see Darwin as the destroyer of all morality, the theory of evolution leaves one perfectly satisfactory approach to morality and political philosophy untouched. namely, traditional western liberalism.

Among the most important claims introduced in this book is the claim that it is language that makes it possible for us to have our kind of mind, a kind of mind that, by being able to cooperate with other minds and record the results of cooperation for others to build on, can figure out the physics of the universe, find cures for serious diseases, build Hubble telescopes and the Channel tunnel, and so on and so forth. The book set off a stormy debate with Steven Jay Gould and others in the New York Review of Books in 1997.

In the late 1990s, Dennett published another collection of essays, Brainchildren (1998), a remarkably diverse array of pieces mostly on consciousness and artificial intelligence. His most recent book has already been mentioned, Freedom Evolves (2003). He is currently working on a book on religion. In addition to the books, Dennett has written an average of ten papers and so on a year for thirty-five years.

There are many sides to Dennett's contribution but one of the most important is the way he challenges orthodoxies. He is a master at showing what is wrong with points of view with which he disagrees. One of his most characteristic techniques is to go after comfortable ideas with what he calls intuition pumps. We will close this article with an example, the case of Mr. Chase and Mr. Sanborn:

Mr. Chase and Mr. Sanborn both used to like a certain coffee. More recently it has lost its appeal. The reasons they give seem to differ markedly. Chase: 'The flavour of the coffee hasn't changed but I just don't like that flavour very much now.' Sanborn: 'No, no, you are quite wrong. I would still like that flavour as much as ever. The problem is that the coffee doesn't taste that way any more.' [taken from Dennett 1988]

Dennett's target is the idea that there is always a clear distinction between a conscious state, in this case how something tastes to us, and how we react to it. When we read about Mr. Chase and Mr. Sanborn, we are meant to say to ourselves, 'Hmmm, maybe the distinction is not so clear after all.' This tiny doubt is then supposed to generalize.

At the time this was written, Dennett was far from retiring. Doubtless there are many more works to come.

Major Works by Dennett

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Dennett, D. C. (1978) Brainstorms. Montgomery, VT: Bradford Books

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Further reading

Brook, Andrew and Donald Ross. 2002. Daniel Dennett. Contemporary philosophy in focus. New York & Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

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