Interrogating Our Brains

Daniel Dennett returns to his roots with a sweeping and detailed view of the human mind

From Bacteria to Bach and Back
By Daniel C. Dennett
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BY MICHAEL S. GAZZANIGA

IN THE MOVIE “Diner,” there is a moment when a teen out for a drive stops to gaze at a beautiful woman galloping through the countryside on her stallion. Her friend and says, “Do you ever get the feeling that there’s something going on that we don’t know about? I mean, there’s something of the same sort—on an intellectual level—when I first met Daniel Dennett almost 50 years ago. I was a young psychobiologist at UC Santa Barbara and hosting a famous physicist/neuroscientist, Donald M. MacKay, for a series of talks on how the brain worked in a mechanistic way. Mr. Dennett showed up for the talks, having driven more than 150 miles, prior to the construction of connecting freeways. As I watched this tall, imposing man—with the physical sure-footedness of a Rocky Mountain buckhorn and the mental agility of an Oxford don—intensely discussing my esteemed guest’s ideas and their implications for free will, I knew I had to learn more about how his mind worked. I started reading Mr. Dennett back then and haven’t stopped.

Mr. Dennett, now a professor of philosophy and cognitive science at Tufts University, has always shown a bright light on the problem of consciousness. His early writings insisted on the idea that consciousness was an illusion, a trick that the multifaceted brain pulled to give us a way of feeling life’s rich array of sensations. His first book, “Consciousness Explained” (1991), the cognitive-science cognoscenti quipped that the title should have been “Consciousness Explained Away.” That was obviously not Mr. Dennett’s point. It was thought by many distinguished philosophers, such as John Searle and Thomas Nagel, that Mr. Dennett was abandoning the first-person experience of consciousness, the personal nature of it, the qualia. He wasn’t at all. He never doubted consciousness itself. He was offering a philosophical framework—more sophisticated than both common sense and religious dogma—for thinking about consciousness and the way in which subjective experience is constructed by our brains.

A few years ago, Mr. Dennett’s enormous appetite for understanding the mind found him taking a detour to understand religious beliefs. Now he has returned to his intellectual roots, and in “From Bacteria to Bach and Back” he has brought together a lifetime of relentless engagement with the mystery of the mind. Using the tools developed by Darwin, Alan Turing and more recently Richard Dawkins, he provides more definition to his view that mindless elements (cells) can build minds just as mindless ants can build castles. Those ants don’t care about the castle, and those cells don’t care about you.

The book is a solid reference point for considering a multitude of ideas, opinions, notions and facts about the mind. Through 15 swift chapters (each divided into digestible sub-chapters), Mr. Dennett takes us from the “prebiotic” world of “The Evolution of Understanding” in animals. He retraces the origins of language, describes how “brains” mind. Using the tools developed by Darwin, Alan Turing and more recently Richard Dawkins, he provides more definition to his view that mindless elements (cells) can build minds just as mindless ants can build castles. Those ants don’t care about the castle, and those cells don’t care about you.

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Darwin saw the importance of bottom-up processes—but it was Alan Turing who suggested how cascades of them could build toward what we call consciousness. Darwin’s suggestion is quite profound and complicated and has often been misunderstood. In response to Mr. Dennett’s early landmark book, “Consciousness Explained” (1991), the cognitive-science cognoscenti quipped that the title should have been “Consciousness Explained Away.” That was obviously not Mr. Dennett’s point. It was thought by many distinguished philosophers, such as John Searle and Thomas Nagel, that Mr. Dennett was abandoning the first-person experience of consciousness, the personal nature of it, the qualia. He wasn’t at all. He never doubted consciousness itself. He was offering a philosophical framework—more sophisticated than both common sense and religious dogma—for thinking about consciousness and the way in which subjective experience is constructed by our brains.

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For Mr. Dennett, free will is indeed an illusion, but it is a useful and necessary one, like our conscious sense of ourselves. An illusion like this allows us to live and work in a society. As Mr. Dennett says, “We couldn’t live the way we do without it.” He goes on to argue that we should avoid cruel retributive punishment, but we should not give individuals a pass on moral responsibility. “If—because free will is an illusion—no one is ever responsible for what they do, should we abolish yellow and red cards in soccer, the penalty box in ice hockey and all the other penalty systems in sports?” In short, we still must regulate society as if we are choosing our actions, punishing conduct that breaks the rules we have set for ourselves. Obviously what Mr. Dennett means by free will may be different from what you thought it meant.
Daniel Dennett Explains It All

You may have a theory about your dog, but your dog doesn’t have any kind of theory about you.

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