Daniel Dennett – a classical philosopher

He is interested in reconciling folk psychology – our common sense beliefs about the mind – with what science tells us about the mental. Even his critics agree that Dennett has achieved much in this regard.
Perhaps the most distinctive feature of a philosopher is his scepticism. In the history of philosophy there have been thinkers who doubted in such an extreme and consistent manner that, when reading their works, one can suspect that there are persons who definitely had too much free time on their hands. What is, however, interesting is that in the case of some philosophers, as one familiarises oneself with their arguments, these suspicions vanish. And finally one draws the conclusion that their views cannot be true — you cannot seriously think like that! — but it is still not entirely clear how to challenge their claims. Often this is the reason why philosophical ideas surpass their creators.

The authors of such concepts are exceptional philosophers. However, if one can describe them also as classical philosophers — referring not to the period they were living in but to the way they thought and the influence of that thought — then one of the classical philosophers is Daniel C. Dennett.

Santa Claus and the deadly sin

The American thinker, writer and cognitive scientist who is in charge of the Tufts Center for Cognitive Studies is one of the most influential contemporary thinkers. He even looks like somebody who probably has something to do with philosophy. On the other hand, his exuberant, bright beard and stout frame can also be associated with Santa Claus. Some of the reasons of Dennett's popularity have been mentioned — his views are as surprising as they are persuasively argued. He writes amusingly and insinuatingly and this seems to be regarded by his peers — when we look at the works of other academic philosophers — as a deadly sin.

Even original ideas do not emerge in a vacuum. In Dennett's writings one can notice the influence of his two mentors, Willard Van Orman Quine and Gilbert Ryle. Both of them are true giants of contemporary philosophy, but it is difficult to find a pair of thinkers so unlike in their style. Quine's writings are full of technicalities and they resemble the work of a scientist; he even intended to replace philosophy with science as he thought the methods of the latter allow one to answer the perennial philosophical questions. On the other hand, Ryle represented the so-called ordinary language philosophy and in his philosophical writings he used everyday language. This combination of styles strongly influenced Dennett who draws strongly from state of the art science, but softens its sharp and inaccessible edges with ordinary language.

In a well-known paper published in 1962, Wilfrid Sellars wrote that "The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term". These words become truly meaningful when the context of their use is mentioned. The title of the paper is "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man". In this work, the goal of philosophy is described as adjusting our manifest — everyday — image of the world with its scientific counterpart. This enterprise became particularly significant in recent decades, because, due to the development of the sciences of man, the tensions between both images have become numerous.

Dennett, as he himself admits, understands philosophy similarly to Sellars and aims to reconcile our folk psychology — our common sense beliefs about the mind — with what the sciences tell us about the mental. He is one of the philosophers who feel comfortable at the border of philosophy and science — in his case the sciences in question are evolutionary biology and cognitive science. One of his greatest achievements is building the foundation — with the help of many inventive conceptual tools — which unifies the experimental results of various scientific disciplines interested in the mind and behaviour.

One of the not uncommon critiques of Dennett is that for more than two decades — at least since 1995, the year of the publication of his Darwin's Dangerous Idea — his writings are "merely" popular. His work at the border of two very different worlds, philosophical and scientific, often boils down to the use of slogans, analogies, metaphors and other imprecise tools for thinking. As a result, he is not essentially a permanent citizen of any of these worlds. Yet, it is worth remembering that his most significant accomplishments are quite technical — for instance his doctoral thesis Content and Consciousness or the collection of essays The Intentional Stance — and that they are highly regarded in academic circles. Let's look a little bit closer at a few of Dennett's ideas which determined his distinguished place in contemporary philosophy. The most important of them pertain to consciousness.

The illusion of consciousness

No more than three decades ago the issue of consciousness had not been taken seriously in scientific circles. Christof Koch, who is at the moment a recognised neuroscientist and who decided to study consciousness at the beginning of his career in the 90's, was forewarned that, taking into account his academic future, he should switch to a more mainstream subject as consciousness is only at the fringes of science. And according to the definition of consciousness by the British psychologist Stuart Sutherland which appeared in the International Dictionary of Psychology published in 1995: "It is impossible to specify what it is, what it does, or why it evolved. Nothing worth reading has been written on it."

Perhaps Sutherland changed his mind two years later, in 1991, if he read Dennett's new book Consciousness Explained (which, inexplicably, was only translated into Polish last year). This work, which for the last 25 years has been cited at a level which is both stable and unattainable for almost all other philosophers, is surprising. According to its main thesis, consciousness is only an illusion. Dennett refuses to acknowledge the reality of something which seems to be most obviously real — our private experiences, emotions and thoughts, that we can view the world from a peculiar first-person perspective. For some, not least Descartes, the existence of consciousness is so obvious that they made it the foundation of
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their philosophical systems. For Dennett, the sooner we get rid of these false beliefs, the closer we will be to solving the mystery of consciousness – at the moment the greatest challenge for philosophers and scientists alike.

The American philosopher attacks the intuitive, but in his view mistaken, beliefs about consciousness using various conceptual tools. Some of the most powerful are analogies between the mind and the brain and the software and the hardware of a computer. He identifies consciousness as the result of the operation of numerous programs working on one extraordinarily complex piece of hardware – the brain. So, the proposition that consciousness exists would be comparable to the proposition that the folders we see when we look at the computer screen exist. Everything we see with our mind’s eye is only a virtual reality. It has its virtues – for example, it allows us to predict the consequences of our decisions before we act upon them. However, the quest to find something real which would correspond to what we understand by “consciousness” can only be compared to the quest to find the real Sherlock Holmes. This comparison is, of course, only another imprecise, but vivid and useful tool for thinking which Dennett uses.

In the clutches of a zombie
One of the favourite occupations of the author of “Consciousness Explained” is deconstructing various thought experiments, which he calls “intuition pumps” and which are a common weapon in the philosophical armoury (as a sidenote: the term “intuition pump” is an excellent example of Dennett’s ability to coin catchy formulations which become widespread in philosophy and science. At least in the English literature on the subject, “intuition pump” is almost universally used to refer to a thought experiment). He regards some well-known thought experiments as valuable, but what is really interesting are his critiques of the ones which he finds useless. According to Dennett, one of the intuition pumps which resulted in many misconceptions about consciousness is the so-called zombie argument.

This argument is quite straightforward: imagine you have a doppelganger. This person is your spitting image – she or he talks, laughs, eats and drinks just as you do. The only difference between you and your doppelganger boils down to the fact that, unlike you, she or he does not possess consciousness. This intuition pump is, hopefully, only a philosophical fiction, but such a zombie is logically possible – which means that we can imagine she or he exists. And this, according to some, is enough to demonstrate that consciousness evades scientific method.

Zombies are at the centre of the controversy pertaining to consciousness mainly because of the Australian philosopher David Chalmers, one of Dennett’s greatest adversaries. The dispute between these thinkers is still mentioned in connection to the explanations of consciousness, and their arguments remain relevant – lately, in the context of the popular television series Westworld, the plot of which circles around the fact that robots become conscious. Chalmers thinks that the zombie argument is an excellent illustration of the so-called Hard Problem of consciousness, consisting in the explanation of why consciousness exists. From the scientific point of view, at last in principle, almost everything about the zombie can be explained – even such complex issues as the workings of his brain and its connection to behaviour. According to the Australian philosopher, scientific explanations still would not provide us with the answer to the question why we are conscious and the zombie is not. In his view, consciousness is an addition to the biological nature of man. It is, however, a crucial addition – if nobody would be able to subjectively experience anything, then one could reasonably ask what makes life worth living.

Chalmers’ position seems to be a contemporary version of Cartesian dualism – the doctrine that the mind and the body belong to separate realms of existence. This is in complete opposition to Dennett’s attempts to break the spell that consciousness holds on our thinking. In should not come as a surprise, then, that the American philosopher compares his Australian colleague to a talented illusionist, who uses words to create the experience that something is real despite the fact that it is not. Not to mention the fact that the place of a zombie is in science-fiction and not in the academic philosophical literature. Even if Dennett is right, however, the illusion created by Chalmers is unusually effective as it still holds numerous philosophers in its clutches.

Competence without comprehension
Scepticism toward the special role of consciousness in thought and behaviour is mirrored in Dennett’s other ideas. Only slightly less controversial are his concepts pertaining to the influence of human thought on the evolution of culture. He claims that cultural evolution is essentially underpinned by the same mechanism which is responsible for biological evolution, namely the process of blind natural selection. As a consequence, it is of no use to look for intelligent design both in nature and in culture. The changes are caused by random mutations. In nature the mutations pertain to genes and in culture to memes – pieces of cultural information contained, inter alia, in songs, fashion trends and scientific theories. The denial of intelligent design within culture is of course highly counterintuitive. This issue is the main topic of Dennett’s last book “From Bacteria to Bach: The Evolution of Minds”.

The key conceptual tool in his discussion of cultural evolution is competence without comprehension. This concept refers to behaviour which seems intelligent, but in reality it is not the result of any kind of thought. It is the effect of the laborious process of evolution,
filled with "clever" mutations, which give evolutionary advantage to individuals who are lucky enough to possess them. Such behaviour is frequent in nature, from microorganisms to primates. Even bacteria are able to discern certain stimuli and to react "accordingly". The intelligent behaviour of bacteria does not mean, however, that they are able to recognise reasons for their actions. In other words, their behaviour is not the result of their understanding of its causes. All of this seems quite intuitive until Dennett describes in more or less the same way the evolution of human culture. He claims that the greatest achievements of man are, at least to a large extent, the result of a mindless selection process. According to him, our minds are just too sensitive when it comes to the detection of intentionality in their environment. Just as we often ascribe malevolent intentions to our computers when they work in an undesired manner, we also reflexively regard everything created by man as the result of his careful planning.

In the light of the above we should not be surprised by his thoughts on free will. In the case of this problem he undermines another common sense intuition – the belief that when we act we have the ability to do otherwise, i.e. the capacity to choose different ways to act. He claims that "it is not the free will worth wanting" – coining another phrase which is commonly used not only by philosophers – because it requires indeterminism. According to Dennett, indeterminism does not save free will. If our choices are not determined, they depend on chance – at least to some extent. Free will worth wanting is the capacity to determine each choice by our desires and beliefs.

Many critics regard Dennett's views as almost provocative. Many of the most vigorous opponents of the claim that consciousness evades scientific explanation do not deny its existence. This applies to both philosophers and scientists. It is worth underlining this issue as Dennett sometimes presents his views in such a way that one can get the impression that it is the official position of the contemporary science. Also, it is hard to agree that competence without comprehension plays such a significant role – perhaps the only role – in human action. On the other hand, it seems unreasonable to object to Dennett's accessible, popular style of thinking. The dispute between the proponents of popular and academic philosophy is almost as old as the discipline itself – it is enough to mention the comparisons between the systematic philosophies of Plato and Aristotle and accessible, yet less precise deliberations of the later Epicureans or Stoics.

The American philosopher, who is already a classic in his own field, is one of the better examples of why the popular strategy can be valuable – he is perhaps the person most responsible for the opening of the philosophy of mind to the sciences of man. Both domains profited enormously from this dialogue.

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Big Questions in Kraków is inaugurated by Professor Daniel Dennett with a lecture “From bacteria to Bach and back” and dispute “Chance Rules the World?” with Professor Michal Heller.

More details are available at www.wielkiepytania.pl