

Philosophy as the Las Vegas of Rational Inquiry

Daniel C. Dennett

Philosophy is always going to be the default home of nonnaturalists and antinaturalists. Since no other discipline will take them seriously, they gravitate toward philosophy and find each other. Antinaturalism is like the tide; you can try to beat it back, but another wave will arrive with each new crop of thinkers. And each generation tries to find a flaw in naturalism and raises one banner or another before retiring, literally, in defeat with honor.

I view this the same way I view Las Vegas: it's actually a very "green" installation, like the red-light district in Amsterdam. Every society has a subpopulation that loves trashy, glittery entertainment; porn; gambling . . . and it would be foolish to despoil some beautiful area with it. Plunk it in the middle of some otherwise irredeemably inhospitable and infertile desert—concentrate the glitz and sleaze in one place where it can be indulged in with a minimal impact on the rest of the world. What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas! It can be policed efficiently, so that most of the "evil" is just make-believe evil, carnival evil.

"What happens in philosophy stays in philosophy, by and large, and a good thing it does, too."

So I see philosophy as the Las Vegas of rational inquiry, where every *ism* is permitted to be promulgated, where outrageous doctrines are "taken seriously" (well, taken sort of seriously), and in general, nobody gets hurt, because, hey, it's *philosophy*, and who takes that seriously? What

happens in philosophy stays in philosophy, by and large, and a good thing it does, too.

There is, on the other hand, the large portion of philosophy that is dedicated to normative inquiry: What is good, what is right, what is just? Ethics, political philosophy, and philosophy of law are perennially strong subfields where the results can have real-world influence that is deserved and benign. What about those increasing incidents in other branches of philosophy where thinkers aspire to be interdisciplinary, to become serious theory-critics and even theory-propounders? They must learn to measure up to sterner, more demanding rules of presentation. It's not just a question of knowing the literature and empirical accuracy but of exposition that avoids self-indulgent jargon-mongering. If all goes well—and this is a main task for us naturalist philosophers—the "leakage" from the everything-goes precincts of philosophy into the wider culture (and into science in particular) consists of only the rare genuine discoveries, advances of outlook, well-informed criticisms, proven think-

ing tools. Our job also has an internally facing component: policing the egregious excesses among our colleagues while being careful to tolerate the maximum amount of *phoolishness*. (Some years ago, in some private correspondence with psychologist Stevan Harnad, we coined a pair of terms to refer to the tics and foibles of our respective disciplines: *phoolishness* and *psilliness*.)

It is fortunate for us that philosophy is largely ignored by the rest of the society, since otherwise we would have to conduct our business much more cautiously,

guarding against overstatement and the sorts of grand claims that get scientists in trouble with their peers when their advertisements for their hypotheses get distorted or further magnified in the press. Philosophers can take a hard look at anything—whether pornography is good for

people, whether capital punishment should be extended to white-collar crimes, whether money or numbers or chairs or people exist, whether there might be zombies, whether the universe was created exactly six minutes ago complete with all the bogus fossils and photons streaming in from imaginary stars—and this is quite innocuous because there is a sort of quarantine barrier between philosophers' discourses and the general run of conversation and discovery. If there weren't, we would have to worry a lot more about the environmental impact of our musings—and sometimes this can be surprisingly dangerous. I have inveighed against a lot of ill-considered and dire talk about how free will is an illusion, for instance, since I think that many folk think that if science has shown this, then everything is both fated and permissible—a (self-)destructive frame of mind that some people really fall into, the funk of imbibing too much potent philosophy. By all means, let's broadcast the *sound* conclusions of philosophical analysis, but until something approaching consensus is achieved, the promulgation of unsettling perspectives can do serious mischief. The Athenians knew well that Socrates was fully capable of corrupting the youth, even if he himself was in fact innocent of that crime.

When the Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, under Marvin Minsky's direction, was located on the top floors of Tech Square in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the large room

on the top floor was known as the "Play Room." That was where most of the serious blue-sky thinking and speculating went on: a sporadically inspiring, sometimes phoolish or silly, seldom-boring exploration of ideas that just *might* be the solution to huge puzzles. I thought then that philosophy as a whole should be seen as a sort of Play Room for serious thinkers, and that vision of philosophy has never struck me as inappropriate or unfair. Play is serious; play is where one can break the "rules" and discover new vistas. Philosophy at its best is informed play of the highest order and a proper ingredient in any naturalistic vision of inquiry. **FI**

Daniel C. Dennett is University Professor and Austin B. Fletcher Professor of Philosophy and codirector of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University. He is the author of numerous books, including *Breaking the Spell* (Viking, 2006), *Freedom Evolves* (Viking Penguin, 2003), and *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (Simon & Schuster, 1995) and over four hundred scholarly articles on various aspects on the mind, published in journals ranging from *Artificial Intelligence and Behavioral and Brain Sciences* to *Poetics Today* and the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. His most recent books are *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking* (Norton, 2013); *Caught in the Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind*, with Linda LaScola (Amazon.com, 2013); and *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds* (Norton, 2017). He is a Laureate of the International Academy of Humanism.

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