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Why we think

THOUGHT

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FROM BACTERIA TO BACH AND BACK The Evolution of Minds by **DANIEL C DENNETT**
Allen Lane £25 pp496

Daniel C Dennett has written extensively on cognition and evolutionary biology, and his latest book is a lively and cogent account of how human beings, uniquely among species, have evolved to possess a conscious mind. For Dennett, a professor of philosophy at Tufts University, the key thing that differentiates us from other animals is our culture. Over millennia, our brains have become loaded with “thinking tools” that have evolved by the same Darwinian processes as our genes; this “cultural evolution” has shaped our comprehension, turning our brains into minds.

Dennett argues that the best examples of these tools are words. Language, he writes, is “the *launching pad* of human cognition and thinking”, and it has given us the ability to understand ourselves, other creatures and our environment and become “intelligent designers” of things such as works of art. Although he does not claim to have solved the mystery of how language originated, he writes persuasively about how words have evolved to develop human consciousness.

Dennett is aware that there are scientists and philosophers who disagree with him (some object to using Darwinian theory to explain culture, for example, others don't accept that humans are the only animals that are “conscious”), and he wastes time anticipating his critics' objections instead of getting on with explaining his own ideas regardless. Nonetheless, this is an excellent exploration of the concept of cultural evolution, and the origins and consequences of human creativity. **Q**