You don't know you're not a zombie

Atheist Daniel Dennett wonders how human consciousness arose — and what it's even for. Jane O'Grady examines his case

FROM BACTERIA TO BACK AND BACK
by Daniel Dennett
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A light is H.O. heat is the movement of molecules, and in time, claim some philosophers and scientists, we will similarly be able to say that consciousness is azy.

The trouble is, we're not sensorily conscious of water and heat, conceptually conscious of gases and molecules — but what sort of stuff would we be perceiving or conceiving in the case of consciousness?

In a sense, we already know the unconscious physical constituents of consciousness (something we don't know, and conceptually build at, is how their connecting and sparking get created), in a sense: a sensation of heat, sense of indignation, decision to leave the party, visualization of a dolphin or address... all a transformation as magical as the film materializing from Aladdin's lamp.

According to the American philosopher Dennett, the problem of neural-mental connection does not arise. Or, rather, the unbridgeability of the "explanatory gap" is only a self-induced "Cartesian Wound" which, almost 400 years later, Dennett can heal. Dennett has always doubted that anything existed, then deduced that something must be doing the doubling, and must therefore exist himself. But in setting up the indubitable conscious mind, he severed it from the "external", non-conscious physical world, and, says Dennett, skewed inquiry from the outset. So you know you're not a zombie, he satirically demands. "No, you don't. The only support for that conviction is the vanishing of the conviction itself, for going "privileged", our access to our own thinking is really so better than our access to our "digestive processes". Mental events are "user-illusions" like the icons on computer screens, of all the hardware operating in our brains. "We don't see, or hear, or feel the complicated neural machinery hardwiring away", but have to settle for its "metaphorical by-product".

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reading what they do and say, so we learn about ourselves through observing our own actions and utterances, something it is like to be me", it if all, only elicited "because we tell other people and ourselves what it's like to be me."

As for the "qualities" (those purported raw inside feelings that cannot be observed or perceived externally), they would, if they existed, only "double the "cognitive" work to be done". They would have to be perceived in a "Cartesian theatre" in our brains, and perceived by what, asks Dennett. For him, "the true puzzle is what consciousness is for (if anything)". Oppose, aware, the human has evolved from being a set of "merely competent parts" into being a "comprehensive sort". But consciousness is unnecessary for comprehension, look at computers.

Dennett invokes Wilfrid Sellars' distinction between the "scientific image" of what everything is really like and the "manifest image" of the colours, sounds, sensations, tastes, trees, money, marriage, free will and much that we understand and conventions and conventions constructed. Eventually, our "manifest-image" identifications of mental states will be aligned with the "scientific-image" neural structures and events that actually generate them.

But who or what are we (or all "we")? The real user of an operating system, answers Dennett. So at least one consciousness exists, then? And surely must do, for he says that "we are better at predicting the behaviour of human land even of some non-human animals and machines when we treat them as if they had meaningful reasons for their shaped behaviors", it is part of his vaunted "depersonalization"), however, to make this "intentional stages" seem up to it, merely pragmatic. Yet isn't whoever so adorably actually as sentient and rational as she is confusing other "税费s of "fee the image, even if we do have one foot in the scientific image?"

Dennett claims that "the conditions for human experience have evolved, and thanks to "meanings". A meme (the concept was created by Richard Dawkins) is a cultural element (tattoos, songs, catchphrases) that passes from one individual to another either by contagion (imitation) or, in a way analogous to genes, by replicating and transmitting itself from one generation to another. Dennett takes memes to be worlds, which at first were uttered by humans without meaning anything ("competence without comprehension"), but which, gradually, since a word "wants to get itself said", invaded human brains just as viruses (often beneficially) invade human bodies and reproduce themselves inter- and cross-generationally.

Yet genes are composed of DNA, which is an organic part of the human body and does not need to invade it, and viruses are organic entities. What is the chemical constitution of a meme? We know of "nothing like this" yet, in the physical representation of a meme, says Dennett. Which seems to assume that we will do. A word in itself is meaningless, though, which is why Dennett (like Darwin) often makes memes ideas, rather than words. But ideas won't work either. What sort of discrete, circumscribed units are they? Dennett scathingly reminds us that ideas don't need to be experientially "had" by an individual; they are public and impersonal. Which is true when "idea" refers to an objective, conceptual "aboutments" (Fiches) from different outposts islands having different shaped boats; but untrue when it refers to a one-off, subjective mental event (Dawkins thinking this thought).

Dennett makes the very Cartesian error of confusing "idea" as container and temporal occurrence. Yet a meme is a container's potentially timeless, publicly available content. Or perhaps we can metaphorically make the possible notion that "memes" are akin to the ambiguous information sequences. But who in this inside, outside of the evidence of what we know, and, yet, does this information inform? Anyhow, isn't this whole notion of memes just a red herring.

Dennett is one of the "Four Horsemen" of "parapsychology", his galloping is superhuman. Philosophy killed God ages ago. But savage attack on the soul, however, seems to catch us in a dizzying, either-or, Mobius curve. We are, apparently, "guests in our own brains", and he wants to exit us.

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