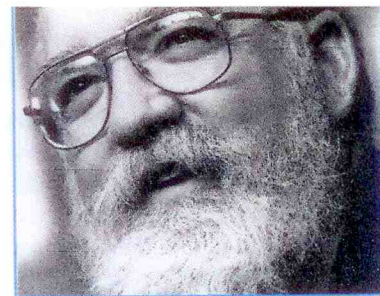


Daniel Dennett Autobiography Part 2



Daniel C. Dennett reflects on his philosophical life, in this episode from the time he received his first academic post, at the University of California, up to 2003.

University of California Irvine was the perfect setting for me to learn a little philosophy. After all, aside from my undergraduate courses, I had had no serious training in philosophy. (In this regard, if in no other, I am like Quine, who got his PhD in philosophy at Harvard, nominally under Whitehead but in fact, as he once told me, almost entirely self-taught. He began his teaching career after having taken hardly any philosophy courses.) I had never even been a teaching assistant, and now I was going to be an assistant professor, designing and teaching all my own courses, and having teaching assistants of my own – a prospect that both thrilled me and filled me with dread. Would my TAs see through me and denounce me as an impostor? I was Melden's sole appointment that first year of classes at UCI in 1965, and he put me to work teaching the entire undergraduate curriculum, aside from ethics, which he reserved for himself. (The wonderful E. J. Lemmon was appointed during my first year, and came immediately to teach logic, but died of a heart attack before he could take up residence.) I taught Ancient, Medieval, and Modern, epistemology and metaphysics, and, in my second year, a seminar on Anscombe and Taylor on intentionality. I crammed my Aristotle, Augustine, Anselm and Kant, and the others, as well as the more accessible secondary sources, and stayed a day or two ahead of my eager but unsophisticated students. I blush to consider what I must have imparted, but hopefully my genuine excitement about these brand new texts made up for the naïvete and just plain ignorance with which I addressed them.

It was time to turn my D.Phil dissertation into articles and a book. I revised the first chapter and sent it out as a journal article. A dozen submissions: a dozen rejections, with many revisions in between. Then Wilfrid Sellars, editor of *Philosophical Topics*, wrote me a nice letter saying that he was intrigued by the draft I had sent. He thought it would be fine once I clarified a few foggy points. I sent him a clarified version within the week, and he wrote back to say that now it was clear what I was doing, he thought it wasn't publishable! A few more rejections and I gave up on that chapter and started several other projects, with no greater success. Perhaps I wasn't going to make it as a philosopher after all.

One day Julian Feldman, an Artificial Intelligence researcher at UCI, came storming into my office with a copy of Hubert Dreyfus's notorious memo for think-tank RAND, 'Alchemy and Artificial Intelligence'. What did I make of it? I read it and said I disagreed quite fundamentally with it. "Write up your rebuttal, please, and get it published!" Why not? I wrote 'Machine Traces and Protocol Statements' and promptly published it in *Behavioral Science* (1968). My first publication – and my career as philosopher-laureate of AI had begun. I'd

already been attracted to the field by Alan Ross Anderson's pioneering anthology, *Minds and Machines*, and found at Irvine a small group of AI researchers who invited me to join them. Allen Newell came through town to give some talks. He struck up a lively conversation with me, and I was hooked. Other colleagues at Irvine, in particular the psychobiologist James McGaugh, struck by my knowledge of and interest in theories of learning in neural systems, also took a vigorous interest in further educating me and getting me thinking about their work and its problems. Nor were my philosophical colleagues shy about contributing to my education. Joe (Karel) Lambert had been an experimental psychologist before he turned to logic, and he was a knowledgeable and resourceful defender of Skinnerian behaviorism, quick to puncture my superficial knowledge and rub my nose in the experimental literature, not just the manifestos of Skinner and his fellow ideologues.

In the summer of 1967 I sent a revised version of my dissertation to the famous Routledge & Kegan Paul series, *The International Library of Philosophy and Scientific Method*. This series of books, with their red covers and yellow dust jackets, included most of my favorite books in philosophy: Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, Smart's *Philosophy and Scientific Realism* and Sellars' *Science, Perception and Reality*, for instance. A year passed without a word from the new editor, Ted Honderich, who had taken over from A.J. Ayer. I didn't dare upset the applecart by complaining about his unresponsiveness. Finally, when I knew I was off to Oxford for a quarter sabbatical in the fall of 1968, I wrote a timid inquiry to Honderich, who discovered that the manuscript had been mislaid by the referee to whom he had sent it. Honderich retrieved it, read it himself and forthwith accepted it, pending revisions which I hastened to complete that autumn in Oxford. I was in heaven. But still, I couldn't talk about it to other philosophers.

My problem was that my way of approaching the then-standard issues in the philosophy of mind was too eccentric, too novel, to afford easy entry into a discussion. When somebody asks you what you're working on, you usually can't back them into a corner and harangue them for a couple of hours about your project, and I could imagine no more modest framing job. After all, my attempts to publish the first chapter of my dissertation showed that the first ideas I needed to get across were bound to be misunderstood – had already been misunderstood in half a dozen versions by some of the best philosophers of mind in the field. So I was a very lonely and uncertain philosopher those first few years at Irvine, spending more happy hours talking AI or psychobiology than philosophy. In spite of my presumably sterling pedigree as a student of Quine and Ryle I felt like an outsider, a dark horse one should probably not bet

