

# Commentary on Kraynak

**Daniel C. Dennett**

In my primary essay in this volume, I proposed a naturalistic defense of the values of human dignity against the encroachments of science and technology, arguing that it was more robust than the traditional defenses, which I described as brittle and vulnerable. “We need to articulate these values in open forum. When we attempt this, we need to resist the strong temptation to resort to the old myths, since they are increasingly incredible, and will only foster incredulity and cynicism in those we need to persuade.”<sup>1</sup> I concentrated on the strengths of my proposal rather than the shortcomings of the traditional alternatives, in part because I didn’t want to be suspected of choosing weak examples to quote and criticize. (Finding mediocre opponents to ridicule is usually easy and seldom instructive.) Now that Robert Kraynak’s essay has been delivered into my hands, I have a good example of just what I meant by a traditional defense, giving me a golden opportunity to illustrate the problems inherent in such an approach.

Kraynak sets out to defend what he conceives of as a middle ground between dualism and materialism, inspired by Aristotle’s tripartite division of plant (or vegetative) souls, animal souls, and rational, human souls. “As a living being, man shares characteristics with other animals while also being essentially different; he is neither

a beast nor a god but an ‘embodied rational soul.’”<sup>2</sup> I agree with this, so far as it goes. It is Kraynak’s unfortunate supplement, drawn from Christianity, to the effect that this embodied rational soul is immortal, immaterial, and “mysterious,” that causes all the problems. How can I, an unflinching materialist, agree with Kraynak that what sets human beings aside from all other creatures is an embodied rational soul (as contrasted with a mere animal soul)? No problem. As Kraynak himself observes, I am not the kind of materialist Hobbes or Skinner were, denying the existence of freedom and dignity:

Dennett’s ambition is to apply the Darwinian algorithm to everything—e.g., our universe and its laws arose from a myriad of accidental tries with other combinations that did not survive.\* This enables him to argue that the universe and man are accidental products of evolutionary forces, but they still have meaning and purpose once they are “frozen” in place. Thus, scientific materialism can be vindicated while avoiding moral relativism and affirming a culture based on modern liberalism, democracy, and respect for the dignity of persons.<sup>3</sup>

Just so. As Giulio Giorello once said, as the headline to an interview with me in *Corriere della Sera*, Milano, in 1997: *Sì, abbiamo un’anima. Ma è fatta di tanti piccoli robot.* “Yes, we have a soul, but it’s made of lots of tiny robots!” This has been my motto for almost a decade, and its import stands in stark contrast to Kraynak’s vision. The “tiny robots” in question are cells (such as neurons) and even tinier robots (such as motor proteins and neurotransmitter molecules) that have evolved to form amazingly ingenious armies of operatives, uniting to form an organization—as Aristotle said—that sustains not just life, like the vegetative soul, and not just locomotion and perception, like the animal soul, but imaginative, rational, conscious thought. Kraynak accepts that Aristotle’s first two souls can be material organizations, as Aristotle himself maintained, but he thinks the rational soul must be composed according to altogether different principles. And in support of this he even quotes the passage from Aristotle that I

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\* Kraynak cites my *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, p. 185; this is not quite accurate, but let it pass.

had alluded to in my essay. Kraynak observes that Aristotle held that “‘Man is not the best thing in the universe’ because the heavenly bodies are more perfect; they move in eternal circular motion which man can contemplate and admire but cannot emulate.”<sup>4</sup> But the great philosopher was wrong about this, as I pointed out:

One of Aristotle’s few major mistakes was declaring “the heavens” to be made of a different kind of stuff, entirely unlike the matter here on Earth—a tactical error whose brittleness became obvious once Galileo and company began their still-expanding campaign to understand the physics of the cosmos. Clinging similarly to an immaterial concept of a soul at a time when every day brings more understanding of how the material basis of the mind has evolved (and goes on evolving within each brain) is a likely path to obsolescence and extinction.<sup>5</sup>

Kraynak thinks that the soul has to stand outside the purview of the natural sciences—has to be “mysterious.” This is transparently wishful thinking. The soul is not going to stay mysterious, and it’s a good thing it isn’t, since as we come to understand how it works, we will also be able to *explain* why and how human minds are morally competent in a way animal minds are not. We don’t have to declare that this is a “mysterious election”—one of the least satisfying dodges I have ever seen. Courage, Professor Kraynak! We can explain these matters, just as we have explained reproduction and self-repair and metabolism, for instance.

Kraynak thinks I am contradicting myself, “reintroducing ‘sky-hooks’” in my understanding of man:

What is missing in Dennett is the humility to acknowledge that he assumes an essential difference between humans and animals based on something like a rational soul, even though he reduces man to accidental evolutionary forces.... Thus, he implicitly embraces a dualism of substances (matter vs. mind or nature vs. freedom) that divides humanity into two orders of causality which cannot interact except by external mastery.<sup>6</sup>

Nonsense. This is a curious passage, since as examples of a “dualism of substances” Kraynak offers two candidates, only one of which, matter vs. mind, could be considered a dualism of substances. The opposition of “nature vs. freedom” is a telling category mistake. Neither nature nor freedom is a substance, and they are not suited for opposition—unless you are presupposing, as Kraynak apparently does, that freedom (free will) *cannot* be natural, *must* be a sort of magical abridgment of the laws of nature. This idea has a long tradition, but so have its rebuttals, unremarked by Kraynak. There is no problem of “two orders of causality”; all causality is physical. The space of reasons fits comfortably within the material world of living, evolved things.

More debilitating than his assumption—he offers no argument—about the impossibility of a natural account of freedom is his presumptuous rhetoric:

“When Adam had lived a hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth” (*Genesis* 5:1-3). A third passage occurs in the story of the Flood when God blesses Noah’s family: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth.... For your lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning.... Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image” (*Genesis* 9:5-7).

These are the only references in *Genesis* (and in the entire Hebrew Bible) to the *Imago Dei*. They show that God created the natural world as a hierarchy with the human species at the top, possessing a special right of dominion over the lower species. In the first grant of dominion, man is commanded to subdue the birds, fish, and cattle, but his food is restricted to plants (*Genesis* 1:29-30). When Adam and Eve are created in the Garden, they are further restricted by the prohibition not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, lest they shall die. After they disobey, whatever dignity they previously possessed is henceforth combined with depravity and mortality; but their dignity is not entirely lost.<sup>7</sup>

What does he think he is doing here? These passages from scripture don't "show" anything. Surely he knows that most of the people in the world—the people he should be attempting to reason with in this open forum on human dignity—don't believe any of this! My friend Sally, who is always right, has informed me that human dignity is a gift from space aliens who visited the planet about six million years ago. Take my word for it—there's nothing to discuss. Sally never makes a mistake! I take it that everyone can see that this claim of mine is simply an unacceptable move in the game. Kraynak's flat assertion of the truth of these passages from the Bible is no more acceptable. I don't object to his using scripture to try to make points, and it doesn't matter whether the passages are true or not. (I think they are obviously false—the Garden of Eden never existed, and nobody fathered a child at age 130.) But even if those of us who do not believe in the literal truth of the Bible are wrong, Kraynak has no right to assume this. He must argue for the truth of these passages, explain their truth, give reasons for believing them. Anything else is simply rude. We have to begin tuning our ears to these speech acts, and recognize them for what they are: personal fouls. Kraynak several times chides me and Searle for lack of "humility," when it is his arrogant, in-your-face assertion of Christian dogma that would be truly offensive if it weren't so comically ineffective.

Once we set aside such inappropriate contributions to the conversation, we have plenty to talk about. Human dignity is well worth protecting, and we can do it without first converting everybody to fundamentalist Christianity. Isn't my appeal to science equally presumptuous? No, on two counts. First, there is no sectarian science—no Muslim geology or Christian mathematics or Hindu biology. Every religion in the world can be reasonably assumed to accept the scientific method—after all, they rely on it when collecting their alms and building their temples—so this is one of the few areas of truly common understanding around the world. (Music is arguably another, but it isn't so much a method of understanding as a means of focusing and enhancing experience—you can't solve a problem or explain a puzzle with a piece of music.) Second, at every point my appeal to the claims and presuppositions of science may be challenged. It is for this reason that my faith in science is not any sort of religious faith. It is based entirely on the proven record of scientific

success, and makes no appeal to authority beyond the reasoning ability of each individual in the conversation. It has been fashionable in some academic groves in recent years to downplay the power of such methods, insisting that all conversations—however biased or illogical—are on a par, but fortunately that fad is going extinct, and people are resuming their appreciation of the truly thrilling power of open-ended rational questioning. If you “don’t get it” all you have to do is ask, persistently and politely, for an explanation of the baffling points. This may sometimes be met with impatience and rudeness, but everyone knows that, officially, it is the responsibility of the scientific researcher to *explain* and *defend* every last claim. That contrasts sharply with the celebration of faith and mystery found in most religions, and this is what simply disqualifies them from playing the leading role in the peaceful, mutually respectful explorations we are now engaging in. The sacred texts of the world’s religions may be used as rich sources of ideas, but brandishing them as above criticism and then celebrating the “faith” with which one excuses oneself from defending them is an abuse of religious freedom.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> From my essay in this volume, p. 58.
- <sup>2</sup> From Kraynak’s essay in this volume, p. 70.
- <sup>3</sup> From Kraynak’s essay, p. 67.
- <sup>4</sup> From Kraynak’s essay, p. 70.
- <sup>5</sup> From my essay, p. 45.
- <sup>6</sup> From Kraynak’s essay, p. 68.
- <sup>7</sup> From Kraynak’s essay, p. 75.

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