

Daniel Dennett

Daniel Dennett (born 1942 in Boston, Massachusetts) is a prominent U.S. philosopher whose research centers on philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, and philosophy of biology, particularly as those fields relate to evolutionary biology and cognitive science. He is currently the codirector of the Center for Cognitive Studies and the Austin B. Fletcher Professor of Philosophy at Tufts University. Dennett is also a noted atheist and advocate of the Brights movement. His first book, *Content and Consciousness*, appeared in 1969, followed by *Brainstorms* (1978); *Elbow Room* (1984); *The Intentional Stance* (1987); *Consciousness Explained* (1991); *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (1995); *Kinds of Minds* (1996); *Brainchildren, A Collection of Essays 1984–1996* (1998); *Sweet Dreams, Philosophical Obstacles to a Science of Consciousness* (2005); and *Breaking the Spell* (2006).

Luís Rodrigues—In your book *Breaking the Spell* you consider religion as a “natural phenomenon.” Philosophically speaking, can there be types of phenomena other than “natural” ones? Establishing the dichotomy between natural/supernatural, aren't you conceiving the possibility of a supernatural realm existence?

Daniel Dennett—The only way to provide grounds for believing in supernatural phenomena would be by trying to explain the phenomena as natural phenomena and failing utterly. Of course, there would be the very real prospect that some unimagined naturalistic explanation had been overlooked, but by the time we've resorted to positing radical new laws of physics which we don't understand, we're conceding that the phenomenon is supernatural (by our existing standards of what is natural). It is not hard to describe imaginary trains of events that

would convince most naturalists that there were some supernatural events (miracles).

LR—But does atheism necessarily entail an adherence to physicalism (a philosophical view defending that everything can be reduced to a physical/natural explanation)? If not, how can other philosophical views be compatible with an atheist worldview?

DD—Certainly atheism is compatible with nonphysicalist views. For instance, David Chalmers is a well-known dualist, and I am quite sure he is an atheist, though I've never asked him.

LR—When the Vatican, through the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, says it “promotes the progress of the mathematical, physical, and natural sciences and the study of epistemological problems related thereto,” how do you see this attempt by religious institutions to “promote science”? Is it real? Is it productive? Is it necessary?

DD—I think the Vatican has genuinely promoted science in a number of regards. So have tobacco companies, for instance. But when supporters of science have an agenda that rules out the widespread publication of certain answers to the questions being raised, you have to be skeptical. Pope John Paul II said evolution is a fact, not just a theory—but then he spoiled the effect by explicitly exempting the mind (soul) of *Homo sapiens*. That is like saying that levitators are exempt from the law of gravity.

LR—Do you think Intelligent Design (a “made in the USA” theory), has the conditions to be exported worldwide and become a part of Catholic doctrine?

DD—I certainly hope not, since it is transparently dishonest, intellectually. I used to think that ID was only an American problem, but recently they have been exporting it rather effectively. The silver lining on this cloud is perhaps that Europe will be less scornful of American credulity when they encounter it among their own citizens.

LR—With the tremendous success of self-help books, the spreading of sects, cults, and a myriad of superstitions related with ancient and recent ideas (astrology, quantum healing, etc.), supernaturalism is on the rise. How can dialogue be established with the growing number of people who wish to enter Plato's cave only to be entertained by the shadows of hope and delusion?

DD—I don't think these people want dialogue. That is, they aren't, as a rule, prepared to do some hard work to find common terms and understanding. Most supernaturalism is quite obviously just an excuse for *not* thinking carefully about one phenomenon or another. So trying for dialogue is often systematically fruitless.

LR—You have a book called *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*. After Darwin's dangerous idea (namely, natural selection), what other ideas and novelties coming out of biology (and also, philosophy) do you think can reinforce atheist arguments? And what ideas can jeopardize them?

DD—The tremendous success of naturalism, in all the sciences, not just biology, makes it an unrivaled foundation for all knowledge claims. Think of how our knowledge of astronomy and cosmology undermines traditional religious ideas. Would God have made billions and billions of galaxies with billions of stars and planets, just for the sake of a few tens of thousands of years of human experience? Our species is unlikely to be eternal, and even if we last for 10 million years more, this will be an insignificant eye blink of time on one tiny planet in one minor galaxy.

LR—Nevertheless, most human beings aren't willing to accept that there isn't a higher purpose in life, or a higher being, bigger than themselves. Where can you find the root and justifications to this unshakable need for "beyondness"? Will it forever be a human trait?

DD—"Bigger than themselves" is nicely ambiguous; I find higher purposes bigger than *my* self, but not bigger than the collective purposes of the best of humanity. We are not wrong to desire the existence of something more important than our own minor individual existences. The idea that this must be something supernatural is simply a mistake.

LR—What do you think prevents people all over the world from questioning their own religious beliefs, even in the face of the diversity of religions, spiritual cults, and philosophies that permeate each culture?

DD—I think a combination of a sense of loyalty, often buttressed by a concern for elders whose lives we don't want to blight with our "betrayal," plus a modesty about one's own powers of inquiry, are enough to make many, if not most, people deeply conservative about what they will profess in public about religion. Their private thoughts are another matter.

LR—Do you think it is preferable to have a society in which social peace is provided by religious bonhomie and unanimity, or a society where conflict is always rising due to the diversity of religious and irreligious points of view?

DD—This is a good question, to which I don't have a confident answer. Might it be better to cloud our vision and live in a comforting stew of hypocrisy and obfuscation, if that way we can avoid emotionally draining conflicts? Maybe it would be! It depends, I guess, on how large a price we pay for our insincere lip service. That is hard to measure.

LR—When some people talk about the deity today, they no longer talk about a deity physically intervening in the world—like the ancient gods of old who intervened in the growing of crops, in child-bearing, in health issues, in battles, etc. The "topology" of the divine seems to reside, today, in the inner self (one of the arguments used is that "Hell is not a place, but a state of mind in which we live when we refuse God or practice evil deeds"). Is this "retreat" of God (and gods), from the objective natural world to the subjective inner world of the self, a more challenging aspect for atheism to deal with? I mean, with no way of confirming or refuting the physical presence and existence of God (since he "lives" inside us), isn't the debate between the theist and the atheist jeopardized by subjectivity? How does one overcome this difficulty?

DD—Maybe, as the concept of God is further eroded in this way, the whole issue of the existence or nonexistence of God will have all the

interest and importance drained from it. I certainly spend very little time in *Breaking the Spell* even considering the evidence and argument one way or the other.

LR—How do you think the “New Atheism” movement will evolve, namely in Europe?

DD—I have no idea. It is already possible to be elected to high office in Europe without declaring one’s “faith in God.” There may be no need for a New Atheist movement in Europe. I’d certainly prefer not to have to talk about atheism for the rest of my days! (Like talking about ESP or tarot cards.)

LR—Can you recommend a small bibliography for the religious neophyte who’s interested in knowing more about this “strange idea of atheism”?

DD—Certainly start by reading the other “horsemen of the Apocalypse”—Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, and Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*.

LR—Most people try to be believers due to their fear of death and the wish to live forever. How do you deal with the expectation of death and the possibility of living forever?

DD—Forever is a long time! I wouldn’t want to live forever, and the fact that an eternity with no *me* in it will start in a few decades (or sooner) is no more troubling to me than the fact that an eternity with no *me* in it preceded my birth in 1942.

OPEN QUESTIONS

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