



## Daniel Dennett

Reconciling Science and Our Self-Conception

by Matthew Elton

Polity Press, 2003

Review by Martin Allen on Jun 10th 2004

While it would be unfair, and difficult, to say that someone was the *least* systematic of philosophers, it is rather easier to say that Daniel Dennett is not the most systematic we have. Dennett's style, in his articles and books together, is conversational, often roundabout, sometimes elliptical, proceeding as often by way of evocative thought-experiment as by means of more conventional argumentation. After reading Dennett, one often feels persuaded of *something*, even if it is not always clear what that something is. While his work has been of undeniable importance to the course of conversation in contemporary philosophy of mind, stirring debate and providing new lines of inquiry, it is not always clear, on first glance, what the "Dennett philosophy" can be said to be. Of course, it is not necessary, nor even always desirable, that a thinker have one over-arching line of thought—a lifetime of profitable research may well be comprised of work on any number of disparate and generally disconnected questions. And yet a reader of Dennett's philosophy, particularly the neophyte, may often find herself wishing for a glimpse of the bigger picture, especially since Dennett always seems to suggest that there is in fact a more general view to be had, a whole that may well be greater than its parts.

Matthew Elton's survey of Dennett's work provides just such a unifying overview. Working through almost the full range of Dennett's publications, Elton shows that if there is not strictly speaking a system behind it all, there is in fact a certain *unity*, a set of common concerns and insights that link one piece to another. Particularly insightful is Elton's analysis of how Dennett regards Darwinian evolutionary arguments as not only important to our understanding of the usual biological concepts, but to an account of how we identify, understand, and generally deal with other thinking beings. As Elton has it, Dennett seeks always to unify a naturalistic world-view—on which human beings, like all other things, are rooted primarily in the physical reality explained by science—with a more complicated account of such things as mind and will that respects their seemingly singular nature. As Elton puts it, Dennett argues that: there is more to saying what is in the world than describing the particles that fill up space and time. There are patterns amongst those particles that... are not in any way supernatural, but nor can they be described in the canonical language of science, the language of regular, law-governed causal structures [5].

While Dennett wants to respect the special nature of certain of these patterns, he wants always to keep faith with the insights of a broadly scientific naturalism. As Elton's title has it Dennett's general goal in his work on the mind, natural selection, and free will is to reconcile the sense that there is something special about human beings, or human experience, with the idea that at base the world is without supernatural phenomena of any sort. Dennett proposes "a more modest self-conception, preserving but tempering specialness, [and that] yields concepts that can apply to wholly natural entities"[7].

While it is beyond the scope of this review to go over all of Elton's points concerning Dennett, it is possible to hit the highlights. As explicated here, Dennett's thought on the mind is rooted in the behaviorism and common-sense analysis of Gilbert Ryle. In its essence, the idea is that discussions of things like "beliefs" or "desires" or "intelligent agents" is in point of fact discussion about certain specific patterns of behavior evinced by entities and systems encountered in the world. Such a view of the mental life stands in contrast to various positions that Elton calls "Cartesian." Ranging from the supernatural dualism of Descartes himself to the argument that all talk of mental life can eventually be eliminated in favor of talk simply about purely physical brain-states, each of these views holds that we must distinguish between the behaviors of apparently intelligent agents and "something inside" that determines whether or not that entity is in fact thinking at all. Famously, Dennett rejects any such distinction, arguing that anything that behaved in sufficiently complicated ways would simply *be intelligent*, and no further evidence about the internal workings of such an agent

should ever, or could ever, persuade us otherwise. An explanation of this view occupies two of Elton's central chapters, the first concerning Dennett's idea of the various "stances" we can take to the explanation of various entities, each of which is distinct in its uses and possibilities from the others, and the second treating the related idea that there are "real patterns" in the behavior of entities, patterns only discernible from the standpoint of the so-called "intentional stance." Elton's treatment of this latter idea is most interesting, as it does good service to "Real Patterns," one of Dennett's most difficult—because most evocative—papers. Elton is right to highlight the importance of this work to the overall understanding of Dennett's thought, and his treatment of the connection between Dennett's account of our ability to identify and respond to such patterns and his interpretation of Darwinian natural selection is very illuminating.

Less successful, to my mind, is the analysis of Dennett's view of consciousness, particularly as evinced in his major work, *Consciousness Explained*. It has been said by some critics that the title of that book ought really to be "Consciousness Explained Away," and it is certainly the case that the ideas there have been amongst the most controversial in Dennett's thought. In large part, the debate stems from the fact that Dennett argues that all facts about conscious experience—what it is we see and hear when we see and hear anything—is explicable simply in terms of either the elementary unselfconscious awareness that controls our day-to-day motions, or in terms of our propensities to *report upon* certain of our experiences in a self-aware manner. For Dennett, it seems, my considered experience of a red apple is irreducible, in that it cannot be explained in terms of some set of physical states of my body and environment; at the same time, however, the experience is both explicable and wholly non-mysterious, since my seeing the apple is no more than that I behave in a host of ways, including especially the tendency to claim that I see an apple. Critics of such a view have often tended to focus upon the loss, under such an account, of the apparently qualitative aspect of such an experience, the fact that I do not take myself merely to report that I have seen an apple, but really to have *seen an apple*, to have had a genuine image before me (or perhaps a genuine apple before me). Elton, while treating of some of the objections and controversies surrounding the account of consciousness, seems to skirt some of this controversy more than tackle it head-on. In particular, while he acknowledges that there have been disputes about the possibility of a separation between the behaviors generally associated with sense-experience, and actual sense-experience itself, and treats of some of Dennett's dealings with these, the approach is rather to let Dennett's counter-assertions stand pat, even suggesting that there may be nothing beyond simple difference of opinion to decide the issue. At the very least, I would have liked to see more explicit acknowledgment of the controversial nature of Dennett's view here (something Dennett himself readily admits). Too, there is the telling omission—which to his credit Elton acknowledges—of the related, and significant, essay on "Quining Qualia." Perhaps Elton finds the topic too messy. (Certainly, much of the current philosophical literature on conscious experience is often unpleasant.) However, I think a deeper analysis of this issue would have added to the book.

Overall, Elton focuses more on explication than critical treatment of Dennett's work. This is fine, and should prove highly useful to someone wanting to sort out how it all fits together. While I found no places where I disagreed with Elton's account, I did sometimes find myself wishing for a more pointed analysis of some of the trickier elements of the philosophy. On the one hand, Elton does point out where Dennett has changed his mind, or even conflicted with himself. On the other hand, he does not generally go in much for pressing Dennett too hard, and sometimes lets him off a little too easy when it comes to the tendency, noted in my introductory remarks, to proceed less by careful argument than by compelling, if elusive, story-telling. Someone with already-developed views of Dennett will probably want more treatment of fine points concerning, for instance, how exactly we are to distinguish his ideas from those of the functionalists and representationalists who are put forward here as his opponents, and doubtless there will be critics of Dennett who would wish that their own views received more detailed treatment. For the reader seeking an overall picture of the work, or for someone who has read one or two of Dennett's books, and would like to know where to turn next, Elton's book is highly recommended.

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