

## The machine in the ghost

The location of human consciousness has been a thorny philosophical problem ever since René Descartes made a bad guess that it could be found in the pineal gland. Not that he would have been embarrassed by its failure to show up under an electron microscope: it was in any case a spiritual organ. This incorporeality of the soul was satirized by the English philosopher Gilbert Ryle as "the ghost in the machine" – a very palpable hit, especially as Descartes did indeed view all *other* animals as automatons. But while Ryle's attack thoroughly discredited Cartesian dualism, it did not otherwise illuminate "the mind-body problem."

Scientists are less charmed by this problem than philosophers, and have always found the phenomenology and subjectivity of consciousness irritatingly unassimilable to the kinds of theories that are so successful in chemistry and physics. The easy way out, which was taken by the early behaviorists, is to write off the whole field of consciousness as lying outside the realm of scientific research. Daniel C. Dennett, the author of *Consciousness Explained*, is to be congratulated for preferring to treat consciousness as a fit subject for both science and philosophy; but the aggressive materialism of his approach ends as all such endeavors must end, by ruling the evidence of our thoughts and feelings "immaterial" and therefore incompetent and

irrelevant. The mind-body problem can thus be reduced to the body problem. Since all such physicalist endeavors piggyback on the latest developments in related sciences, Dennett's news bulletin will surprise no one: my consciousness is like a program being run by a computer, and what I am pleased to call my mind is a piece of software attached to the hardware of my brain. Dennett does not object to my calling the operation of this software program "consciousness," as long as I understand that some computers are already, in some circumstances, just as conscious as I am. It is true that they have not yet been programmed to get up in the middle of an experiment designed to test this hypothesis and say, "Whoever put this test together is a moron, I'm out of here" – but they *could* be. It is also true that no single computer has yet been built that can perform all the different discriminations that constitute human consciousness, but this, he says, is only because human engineers don't have any incentive to design systems with multiple channels working in parallel. The obstacles to doing so, however monumental, are merely technical.

This theory will infuriate the sentimentalists who celebrate the specialness of their humanity and disdain their simian ancestors, but it will not raise the eyebrows of scientific sophisticates. The materialists have been riding high since Freud was a boy – in fact, Freudianism cannot be understood without our reminding ourselves of its physicalist substrate. Hard-core hard scientists have been trying to make the mind go away for well over a century. Dennett, a philosopher, is more nuanced and says that the "virtual machine" attached to the brain *is* a mind; but he would be the first to admit that his description of it as a computer that is operated, not by "me" sitting at the keyboard, but by the external prompts that it downloads automatically and responds to

according to its pre-installed program, is going to demoralize the lay reader who feels intuitively certain that his consciousness is a unified "plenum" and that he is in charge.

Perhaps the strongest sense that I have of myself as a self is when I make a decision – or con myself into thinking that I made a decision. Dennett is amused by my Cartesian delusion that "I" "decide." What really happens is a computer-like sifting of the "multiple drafts" of various behavioral responses to stimuli, one of which fortuitously clears the most hurdles during the progress from perception through "pandemonium" to awareness. The possibilities jostle each other for hegemony, one of them survives the tussle, and then, after the fact, I tell myself, "This is what I'm going to do." A hundred years ago, Ambrose Bierce embodied this idea in a few witty verses, which again tells us that Dennett is bringing us very old news:

A leaf was riven from a tree.  
"I mean to fall to earth," said he.

The west wind, rising, made him veer.  
"Eastward," said he, "I now shall steer."

The east wind rose with greater force.  
Said he: "'Twere wise to change my course."

With equal power they contend.  
He said: "My judgment I suspend."

Down died the winds; the leaf, elate,  
Cried: "I've decided to fall straight."

"First thoughts are best?" That's not the moral;  
Just choose your own and we'll not quarrel.

Howe'er your choice may chance to fall,  
You'll have no hand in it at all.

Bierce's poem, which he may have written after reading Spinoza, amplifies his definition of the verb "decide": "To succumb to the preponderance of one set of influences over another set."

Dennett's – and Bierce's – scenario posits my action as the end result of a process that is using me, and about which I can be properly said to be unaware. I am only aware of the *result* of the process. My belief, after the fact, that "I" managed the process all along is the story I tell myself that maintains my self-flattering belief in the existence of the Cartesian director-general. If I am willing to give up this comforting illusion, Dennett will generously allow that the process itself, which flies on automatic pilot and can even include my knowing admission, after it has run its course, that it *has* run its course, *is* "consciousness" – which has now been, as his title promised, "explained."

There is a hint of faddishness in Dennett's seizing upon computer science as the key to a breakthrough about the nature of consciousness, but nonetheless there is a limited validity to his method, which is to notice how we get computers to simulate thinking and then take very seriously the possibility that our brains get our minds to simulate thinking by pretty much the same processes. The problem, I think, is that the weak form of this assertion is trivial and uninteresting – "Sure, that sounds right" – whereas the strong form, with its inevitable implication that there is no "central meaner" inside me that manages the programming and makes decisions about it, is not merely deflating and counterintuitive, but absurdly reductionistic.

There is also the considerable difficulty of testing Dennett's account of consciousness. It is entertaining and it may be true, but by discounting all personal

reports about consciousness, it has a maddening tendency to tautologically confirm its own premises. We can imagine the following point-counterpoint:

"I am aware of the thought-processes by which I examined all the options and made my decision."

"Yes, your consciousness-software includes a program called 'Decision-Illusion.' Each time your organism succumbs to a set of influences, the latest upgrade automatically opens an interactive file that restores your sense of having controlled the outcome by means of a personal choice. People with the free-will software feel better about themselves than people who have the fatalism program, so there are good Darwinistic reasons for you to run this application."

Dennett is a most patient and tolerant debunker of my decision-illusion. He understands that his theory is unlikely to change the way my consciousness *feels* to me. He knows that my subjective experience of consciousness will continue to be the same, whether I cling to the philosophically discredited notion of a Cartesian "homunculus" inside my head – the mini-me that is the essence of me, which calls the shots – or I embrace his newfangled explanation.

This being the case, however, we might be entitled to ask why he thinks his theory is important enough to publish. Is he expounding a difference that does not make a difference? Or does his theory *make* a difference – but somewhere else?

I would opt for the second answer. Nothing about my consciousness or my consciousness changes if I accept Dennett's theory. He has no important contribution to make to psychology; and the neuroscientists will continue to map the brain regardless of what anyone "thinks" about it. But his theory does inevitably sound like another attack on that old philosophical bogeyman called "free will." Dennett

buttresses determinism and puts another nail in the coffin of human autonomy. And if the wrong people think he is right, there can be consequences for public policy.

As long as we persist in taking determinism too literally, some of us will try to discover the mechanisms by which it operates, and others of us will continue to romantically and rebelliously misdefine free will as the opposite of determinism. Then the hard-nosed realists will exert themselves to disprove the existence of free will. So we begin an inane debate:

"Everything is determined."

"No, I can decide right now to raise my hand. Or not."

"Whatever you decide will be conditioned by antecedent events, and if I knew all of them I could predict perfectly what you will do."

"No, I could then decide to do the opposite just to thwart all predictions."

"No, your perverseness could be predicted too."

Dennett is unwise enough to want to get in the middle of this foolishness and side with the determinist as though something is actually at stake. He tries to cut the legs out from under the Cartesian exponent of free will by saying that since there is no "I," "I" don't decide at all.

If the debate sounds as if it does matter, here is the quick solution: the determinist is right to say that every event has meaningful antecedents, but wrong to take that to mean that I cannot discover what they are and change the way I respond to them. But along comes Dennett to argue that I am not going to be able to change anything by an act of will called a decision because "I" am an illusion. Things are going

to happen to my body – my brain is just the most sophisticated part of my body – and as a result I am going to exhibit some behavior: end of story. As I have already indicated, this idea has been around, not only since the time of Freud's teachers, but since the time of the pre-Socratics, and it has been perennial since Darwin gave a mechanistic explanation for evolution: everything is stimulus-response; there is no mediating mind, self, or soul; what feels like a mind, self, or soul is a phantasm produced by electrical currents in the brain; consciousness is a lie that we tell ourselves.

Now I am familiar with this dreary proposition that I do not possess free will. What makes Dennett's theory perverse if not lunatic is its corollary proposition that the *ideas* that I entertain *do* have free will. Yes, my ideas, which for reasons of scientific pretension Dennett calls "memes," have all the attributes of conscious agency: they have intentionality, volition, and self-determination; they have the ability to invade me, to replicate themselves, and to choose strategies that optimize their chances of survival. I seem to be powerless to choose my memes; but they apparently have the power to choose *me*. (Or to put it more rigorously, "I" – the central meaner, the decision-maker – am powerless to choose my memes, inasmuch as "I" do not exist. Perhaps my organism chooses them, or, more precisely, *undergoes* them.)

Memes are the brainchild of evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. Dennett approvingly quotes Dawkins as saying that "a cultural trait may have evolved in the way it has simply because *it is advantageous to itself*." [Emphasis in the original.] Nowhere does Dennett say that *I* shaped the evolution of the cultural trait because it was advantageous to *me*: that way of phrasing the matter would smack too much of

Cartesian consciousness, that old devil homunculus again. So one of Dennett's chapters is titled "How Words Do Things with Us."

Setting aside the unlikeliness of this theory of memes, it leaves all the important problems untouched:

How to think differently about the "self"  
How to raise our children differently  
How to organize society differently

According to Dennett and Dawkins, if we are lucky, better memes for doing these things will arise and attach themselves to us; and if these memes are fitter to survive the evolutionary process of natural selection, thereby prevailing in their fierce competition with other memes, they may, as a superfluity of their own success, carry us to success as well.

Should we not say that if the memes make *us* fitter to survive, *we* will carry *them* to success through *our* succeeding? Wouldn't their success *always* be based on our success? Wouldn't it always be the case that what ensured the memes' survival was identical with what ensured ours? Dennett and Dawkins say no. The memes do not care about us, they care only about themselves. Our child-rearing memes are as likely to be inimical to our children as beneficial. Indeed, do we not see that the child-beating meme tends to be effectively self-replicating, since most beaten children become abusive parents? All that Dennett and Dawkins will allow us to say is that the "successful" memes have built-in mechanisms for *their own* surviving, and if they happen to be good for us, *we* may *coincidentally* survive.

Only if we beat so many children that they destroy the world with nuclear

weapons will the child-beating meme have thwarted its own survival. Something like this happens when a viral infection kills the host organism. Otherwise, the meme's survival and proliferation, like the virus's, runs on a track that is independent of what is good for the host. Take, for instance, the disturbing example of the religious-faith-meme's strategy for survival. Because any examination of the empirical evidence is likely to kill faith, the faith-meme includes as one of its codicils the injunction that such an examination is sacrilegious because faith is spiritually higher than reason. Another codicil says that faith, by definition, can provide "evidence of things unseen." This strategy ensures the self-replication of the faith-meme in spite of the tremendous danger posed to it by the empiricism-meme, and in spite of the fact that we host organisms are usually worse off for carrying the faith-meme. It is resourceful, this faith-meme: it is obviously a lot smarter than I am.

As you can see from this example, according to Dennett's theory, I do not have very much cognitive mobility – but the meme does. The meme invades me and tries to set up shop. Say I reject the blandishments of the faith-meme: to an experimental psychologist observing from a neutral standpoint, this means merely that the faith-meme failed in its effort to attach itself to a host; to Dennett, it means that, in the "pandemonium" of my consciousness, the empiricism-meme that was already installed in my virtual machine somehow preponderated in the ensuing free-for-all. We can speculate as to why, as long as we aren't tempted to go back down the path of Cartesian dualism and re-invent a center of consciousness wherein "I" considered the faith-meme and freely chose to reject it because it was illogical and unhelpful.

It is now my consciousness that is the machine (inside another machine called

my body or sometimes "me") and "I" have become the ghost: there is no one in the control tower. But if we still can't give up on Cartesianism, then perhaps we can be allowed to picture consciousness as a spectral entity that is blown by memes in the psychic wind, this way and that, impotent to do anything about them, waiting for them to do something about it.

So we humans just have to wait and see "how memes do things with us." It may seem to be common sense that we create the memes in the first place, but Dennett reminds us again and again how misleading common sense can be. It may also seem to be obvious that the bad memes replicate only when we judge badly; but there I go again (or something in the vicinity of my body goes again) – Where in my cerebellum do I think I am going to find a "judge"? A ghost can't wield a gavel.

I'll dare Dennett's damnation and say that our values go awry, not because dangerous memes accidentally attach themselves to us and survive the pandemonium of parallel channels and lodge in our virtual machines, and not even because we have "poor judgment" the way lemmings have "poor eyesight," but because we are trying to satisfy bogus psychic needs that were inculcated in us by nefarious means during childhood. Such needs remain unconscious unless we can develop the cognitive mobility to ferret them out and watch them operating. The faith-meme meets one particular animal need at the expense of several others, and what causes it to prevail is not a free-for-all in our neural circuits, but a bad upbringing. As children, and like the animals we certainly are, we crave security. We also need to play, explore, and invent, but those needs are less pressing. Good parenting teaches us to take intelligent risks and fosters our creativity.

It acclimates us to the feeling of disequilibrium that ensues from every foray into the unknown, and it inoculates us against the appeal of authoritarian mass movements. By contrast, poor parenting, including that of the authoritarian society at large, places a high premium on certainty and correspondingly denigrates openness and experimentation. Dennett might say that a belief in the efficacy of the obedience-meme has infected those parents; but a child of nature will be free of that meme until it is enforced. There is no obedience gene in the mammalian genome – certainly not one that entails obedience to a malignant person's verbal instructions about religion or to a bad idea. But if parents are punitive and authoritarian and willing to exercise their absolute power, their children will learn that questing is indeed dangerous. The need of all mammalian children to indulge their curiosity and investigate the environment – a need that requires them to endure insecurity, and one that is biologically weaker in any case than the need for safety – is thus bred out of human children by coercion during their formative years. They grow up to find doubt disorienting and faith stabilizing.

All normal individuals possess some capacity for psychological freedom. That the activation and training of this capacity is itself a caused phenomenon does not throw us back upon the dungheap of determinism. There is a real difference, a difference denoted by precisely that vexing word "freedom," in the behavior of a person who is able to observe the workings of his or her own consciousness and the behavior of a person who is not. This freedom is real because it constitutes the observable and testable difference between an empathic individual and a narcissist; and it can also be shown to produce measurable effects in the empirical world, one of which is typically the individual's shedding of the faith-meme. If I can come to see how the faith-meme

insinuated itself into my consciousness in the first place, I may be able to destroy that meme in its nesting place *and* take steps, which have a good chance of succeeding, to ensure that my children's minds will also be immune to the infection.

Knowing that Dennett will disagree with me, I will go out on a limb with the intuitionists and say further that my ability to do this is a transcendent function that can never be explained by a materialistic account. Like life itself, consciousness is an emergent property that cannot be wholly understood as the sum of its stimulus-response parts. The machine never will and never *can* be built that would use its consciousness to examine its consciousness in the manner of a psychologically self-aware human being.

Dennett would answer, I think, that the viral metaphor is right – that the memes have no more real consciousness than a virus – and that the infinitely complex software of human consciousness, which is for the most part *made* of memes, naturally includes my ability to "think about" the memes. When he backtracks like this and reverts to the weak form of his assertion – saying, in effect, that in comparing us to computers he means no harm – it is temporarily mollifying; but then the question again arises as to why he has bothered to waste so much ink debunking the popular dualistic misconception. He must want us to give up some hampering illusion about consciousness – otherwise why attack the Cartesian analogies so aggressively, and work so hard to substitute the mechanistic analogies? I cannot answer for him – he may just want to speak truth to Cartesian power. A philosopher can go on for thousands of pages stimulated by nothing more pertinent to the rest of us than some other philosopher's thousands of pages. But the effect in the socio-political world of all

such theories is to lessen our sense of personal agency. This emphasis on determinism in turn nourishes the current conservative dogma that we already know how to raise our children and organize our societies – "tradition" or even "natural selection among the memes" having shown us the way – and there is nothing that can or should be done differently about these matters. If this is true, then conditions cannot be improved by changes in education and socialization, because the evils that we see about us are all produced by human nature, which the social conservative conceptualizes as original sin, tainted will, and weak character. Haven't we tried various rehabilitation memes? They just don't survive the Darwinian struggle, the war of all memes against all. Theories like Dennett's inevitably play into the hands of politicians who think shallowly and callously that we should pull the plug on social programs because "everything is hardwired anyway."

Dennett's theory if true has no consequences for humans as individual psychological agents. The persistent scientific effort to collapse mind back into brain – it comes out that way even if Dennett denies it – is irrelevant to most of us. We would not even care if a laboratory test *proved* that we do not have minds at all: even the most fanatical physicalist agrees that we, and he himself, would go on believing in the fiction of our minds. But there may be unforeseen consequences for *the world* if we embrace Dennett's determinism-meme too hastily. By insidiously upholding the slogan that things just are what they are, the physicalist helps to reassure the legislator that he would be wise to stand back and let whatever happens happen. That this is not the *intent* of Dennett when he releases his meme into the intellectual atmosphere is beside the point: as he has told us, the meme will escape the will of its originator and replicate

itself wherever it finds a willing host. Dennett himself is a liberal, but the arch-reactionaries are listening carefully to him.

A better title for his book would have been *Consciousness Explained Away*. The attempt seems foolhardy. But it is always difficult to refute a reductionistic argument because its premises rule out so much that an ordinary person would consider probative evidence against it. If it does not seem to be an easy matter to you to make the case that you are conscious, then I probably cannot do it for you. Therefore I will end by reiterating the question I have already asked: What is the value of Dennett's demonstration that you are not conscious? What has changed for you? What now?