

Welcome to a discussion of Daniel Dennett's "Consciousness Explained", Chapter 1 (Prelude: How are hallucinations possible?).

In an effort to avoid argumentative discussion over vague generalities, I have suggested that we start a new thread that will, each week (more or less), consider a chapter from Dennett's book and discuss the pros and cons of the issues raised by his attempt at a scientific explanation of consciousness. However, as Dennett himself has pointed out, the book is in many places only a preliminary sketch of a fully explanatory scientific theory of consciousness, whose primary purpose is to develop new ideas for thinking about old problems in order to make progress on this very difficult question that has plagued both philosophy and science for many years.

It is suggested that the participants in the discussion should make every attempt to read the material under discussion before joining the discussion and try to frame the questions or issues in context of the author's actual words in the chapter under consideration. This is an attempt to bring some structure to the discussion in order to more closely focus on specific problems with this scientific explanation of consciousness. For example, the author discusses whether it is valuable or even desirable to try and "explain" consciousness in Chapter 2, therefore discussion of these types of questions should ideally wait until those ideas are being discussed in the week dedicated to the issues in that chapter.

Whenever possible the author's actual words should be cited (so we're all on the same page- so to speak) and of course it will sometimes be necessary to include ideas and data from other scientists and philosophers working on these issues, but here also, the text or data source should be cited whenever possible to add weight and context to the discussion. Also, since Dennett's book is some 13 years old, we might expect that new data and further considerations (by the author and others) have deemed necessary some modifications of certain specific aspects of the work since that time. However, in a cursory review of the field it would appear that, overall, the ideas in the book have continued to stand up extremely well in light of new data and studies since the original publication. But any new information that bears on the ideas under discussion would of course be most welcome.

One additional note on "isms": I've seen that philosophers like to use a lot of "isms". For example "materialism". I prefer to avoid arguments about "isms" as much as possible because I think they detract from a discussion of more specific problems. But based on some previous interactions, I think it would be helpful to warn the participants that when Dennett mentions "materialism", it is in contrast to "dualism". It therefore might be better to think of Dennett's "materialism" simply as detectable properties or processes. Furthermore, since it is Dennett's central thesis that all aspects of the mind are ultimately produced from material processes, he would, I think, include as "material" properties, more intangible items such as our perceptions and even our "ideas" of those perceptions, since they are, in many cases quite detectable.

Finally, keep in mind that the first chapter (Prelude) is merely a warm-up exercise for understanding Dennett's later ideas for a scientific explanation of consciousness by attempting to provide a mechanistic or algorithmic explanation of one very small aspect of the mind- hallucinations and the character of dream narratives.

I've asked Faustus to provide a summary of the first chapter's salient points to get the discussion going and he has said he would oblige.

By John Donovan