

Chapter Two: Explaining Consciousness

Here is the chapter where Dennett lays out two important facets of the theory to come: the goals he feels he needs to accomplish, and the constraints he thinks any sound, scientific theory of consciousness must operate under. We're also introduced to the main villain of the book, a family of concepts and habits of talking known as the "Cartesian Theater."

The goals have been alluded to earlier on this thread and others: there is something about our concept of the mental which inclines us to think that in addition to standard physical properties, the universe also contains mental properties:

"The conscious mind, it seems, cannot just be the brain, or any proper part of it, because nothing in the brain could

[1] be the medium in which the purple cow is rendered;

[2] be the thinking thing, the I in "I think, therefore I am";

[3] appreciate wine, hate racism, love someone, be a source of mattering;

[4] act with moral responsibility.

An acceptable theory of human consciousness must account for these four compelling grounds for thinking there must be mind stuff." (p33)

Of course, "mind stuff" is different things to different people. Some prefer to think of mind stuff as an additional property exuded by brains in addition to their manifest physical properties. A version of this seems popular in these forums, though posters likely differ on the details.

I take it, then, that everyone is on the same page as Dennett regarding the quotation above: whatever a theory of consciousness does, it's going to have to account for the four intuitions described. It is a common claim in these forums that the main problem with scientific accounts of the mind is that they try to rope together aspects of our world that have different, incommensurate properties. Dennett clearly recognizes that this is how people often like to talk about mind, and his theory must deal with this in order to succeed.

(I should also mention that in addition to explaining the four intuitions we have about why there must be mind stuff, Dennett also puts his theory in perspective as primarily philosophical, something Probeman has mentioned. That is, when his philosopher hat is on, he is primarily concerned with making a theory-sketch which shows the possible routes a full theory could take, or refutes supposed claims of impossibility. This is not to say that his theory is without empirical content—it has such content, and has made one prediction subsequently verified.)

Next, Dennett introduces some constraints his theory must operate under--the rules of the game, if you will. Since most of the people posting in this discussion seem to think the theory fails (at least, that's how it seems days after they forget about the details—a point that hasn't been lost on me, for one), one possible avenue for discussion is this:

Do the problems for the theory in this book begin early on with Dennett's choice of constraints, or are the constraints seemingly reasonable to all, with the fatal flaws appearing later? I'm really curious to hear what folks think.

The most interesting constraints--to me, anyway—are:

1) No Dualism!

Probeman asks to avoid "ism's", but we forgot to inform Dennett. On the surface, at least, this is hardly a bold constraint to propose. Dualism is about as dead an idea as any in science, though it has a few desperate holders-on in philosophy, typically among religious apologists. No, the "dualism is forlorn" constraint is typically only going to alarm the fringe scholar or unsophisticated layperson.

But there's more to dualism than antiquated metaphysics: there's a whole family of metaphors and ways of talking,

and these have held a deceptive charm even for thinkers who would otherwise call themselves materialists or physicalists (or at least not want the label “dualist”). This family of metaphors Dennett groups together as implying the existence of a “Cartesian theater”: the place in the brain where everything comes together to be appreciated or witnessed by a self, and thus made conscious. Non-dualists who find themselves hypnotized by the Cartesian Theater are called “Cartesian Materialists.”

The Cartesian Theater, in its various forms, is the ultimate target of *Consciousness Explained*, and I don't think this point can ever be underestimated. It is a testament to the subsequent success of the book (at least on this score!) that this meme has caught on and scientists been made more aware of the need to avoid it in their models—I've often come across the term used without any mention of its source, always as something to be shunned. Yet, agreement that the CT and dualism generally are bad things is “as shallow as it is wide”. (p.37)

The reason for this is that it is extremely hard to give up talking like a dualist even when you think you have rejected the metaphysics of souls. Dennett mentions the coyness cognitive scientists have exhibited by concentrating on peripheral systems providing input to a “central source” in the brain, but there's no need to turn there. I found evidence of Cartesian Theater talk from no less than Technotut:

“Maybe you are asking me, simply, what are mental properties. The obvious answer is that they are non-physical properties presented in our experiences.”

So here we have a “presentation”—a show presented for the benefit of a self in the theatre of the mind, a most explicit rendering of the Cartesian Theater, from an avowed “property dualist” who takes it that this way of talking is “obvious”. It might appear obvious to many, but in order to avoid begging the question, we can't treat this habit of talking as a self evident fact about the world. It must stand as a theory in its own right, one which Dennett is trying to take down.

Some other constraints that might spark interest or contention:

2] No Wonder Tissue allowed. This is merely the constraint that Dennett's theory must operate within the boring confines of physical and biological theory as it is known today, with no proposals of miraculous paradigm revolutions (quantum physics being one of the most sadly over-played cards around). The motivation for taking this approach is similar to rejecting dualism as giving up—if your theory depends on entire bodies of theory that have not yet, and may never surface, you're merely off-loading your explanatory responsibilities to scientists of the future. That's one way to give up.

3] No feigning anesthesia. Here Dennett makes his nod towards what Technotut mistakenly thinks is identical with behaviorism—he warns that he's going to deny that our mental lives have certain properties. He even says he might call some of these properties illusions. But, he admits up front that the burden of proof is entirely on his shoulders to prove that they are illusions.

Okay, I've been long winded enough, but I hope my focus has been helpful and stimulating. Have at it!

By “Faustus” (Brian Petersen)