

Breaking the wrong spell: How Daniel Dennett has missed the problem with religion

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The biggest philosophical problem alive today in the popular American intellectual scene isn't a moral one about whether invasion or torture is ever justified, or whether the super-rich are obligated to assist the super-poor. Surprisingly, it is a more metaphysical one: the problem of how *life* came into being. Did God do it? Or is there some perfectly natural explanation? Some claim scientists can't answer this question without bringing in supernatural forces; scientists, in return, say they can get along quite well thank-you without framing that particular hypothesis. And as with all big philosophical problems, the discussions tend to generate more heat than light. But that doesn't stop folks from trying, and in his new book, *Breaking the Spell* (Viking, 2006), Daniel Dennett tries to open an honest and intelligent channel of communication between the God people and the science people.

The aim of Dennett's book is to offer an evolutionist's account of religion. Why on earth, an evolutionist might ask, would nature allow for or even encourage the wide array of human behavior bound up with religion? Because when we look at religion from afar, it appears to demand mighty strange things of us: long and complex rituals, prayer, meditation, studying, writing, preaching, struggle, fear, trembling – and that's not even to mention celibacy, sacrifice, self-flagellation, martyrdom, warfare, and tithing.

Developing these traits isn't exactly like growing big antlers or long necks or hard shells;

when an evolutionist looks at religion, it's hard to see what's in it for us. But Dennett looks further than other people do, and finally delivers a compelling account of why Mother Nature might want us to be religious – or at least tolerate it in us.

We can sum up Dennett's account in the form of a just-so story. Once upon a time (let us say) there were hominids, great-great ancestors of ours, whose brains developed the capacity to think about the world in an interesting way. The “good trick” these hominids developed was the ability to see other entities in the world as *rational agents*. In other words, they began to look at other beings as having (1) *beliefs* about the world and (2) *desires* for things in the world, and (3) clever ways of hitching up their beliefs with actions in order to get the things they desired. Once they started seeing other beings in this way – Dennett calls it “adopting the intentional stance,” and he has a whole book on it and its virtues -- a new world opened up. The hominids could begin tricking these other beings, and outwitting them, and trapping them, and strategizing – all in all, good tricks to have in a harsh world. Of course, the intentional stance also allowed them to do other things, like empathize and understand and execute complicated practical jokes.

But it was easy to over-apply this good trick and to begin to think of all sorts of things as having beliefs and desires, including fires and storms and herds and, basically, “anything complicated that moves,” according to Dennett. Once they began to see purposeful action in one another, it was hard not to also see it all around them.

Now these hominids also had developed *language*, which allowed them not only to communicate beliefs and desires to one another, but also to name and refer to events and people and things that were not immediately present. Language lets us make present

things long gone, and these hominids must have found it irresistible to “make present” friends and relatives who were long gone. So put together (1) a propensity to see other things as agents with beliefs and desires with (2) an ability to refer to the dead, and what do you suppose will happen? Bingo – now hominids are *talking to* those who have passed along into the next world.

Once these hominids were talking to invisible people who had thoughts and desires, it was only a short step to start talking to *gods*. And once god-talk was underway, there followed a wide array of further beliefs these hominids could develop: beliefs in spirits, forces, deities, etc. Sometimes belief in the gods simply gave these hominids a feeling of hope, or a feeling of intoxicating awe; sometimes the belief may have met a strange need we have at times for our own humiliation. And at times the belief offered the feeling of some measure of control over forces that seemed overwhelming.

Some of these hominids were taken to have special abilities to commune with invisible entities and forces, and the success of these shamans, witchdoctors, or medicine men depended also on their abilities to satisfy their patients. From this point it is just a matter of historical time before these humans (for now we are surely not far from the outset of human history) began to codify their beliefs about the invisible world, make their beliefs more sophisticated, wage war with those who disagree with them, and take on more and more of the familiar behavioral features of human religion.

So there you have it: Thog starts to see other things as agents; then he sees too many things as agents, including dead or imaginary things; and before long poor Thog

finds himself doing all kinds of things to appease these fascinating but implacable imaginary playmates. Thus religion.

II.

That's Dennett's account, leaving out all of his qualifications, thoughtful subtleties, interesting tangents, and catchy examples. And it is enough to bring out most of the objections the defenders of religion are likely to raise.

“Does Dennett mean to say that when I'm praying I'm really just talking to an imaginary playmate? Why then do I feel as if I am being heard, and why can I see the results of my prayers in my life?” But the answer to this objection is a familiar one, since we all know that human beings are capable of generating for themselves all kinds of beliefs about the nature of their experiences. Just *feeling* it doesn't make it so.

“But we have historical records of religious events and miracles!” Well, yes, we do have documents relating wondrous things. But of course we also have had the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* around for a very long time, and they too tell of wondrous things in ways similar to our religious texts. We have no more reason for taking the Bible to be accurate than we have for taking Homer's stories as accurate: the questions of authorship, the corroborating texts, and the archaeological evidence all amount to pretty much the same in the two cases. It's just that Zeus and Achilles don't have anyone around to defend them anymore.

“But even if Dennett tells a possible story, it does not rule out the possibility that everything described in the Bible really happened. This is something to be believed on the basis of *faith*, not scientific or historical reasoning.” This is perhaps the most

important objection, and it is one Dennett is very keen to answer. Indeed, Dennett had a go at it in *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (1995), and I can't help but think he wasn't satisfied with what he said then, and wrote *Breaking the Spell* to have his full say. Let me retrace the steps here a bit, so that we can get a full sense of where Dennett is coming from on this issue.

Back in *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, Dennett accused some defenders of religion as playing "intellectual tennis without a net." The defenders he had in mind were those who say that some things have to be accepted on the basis of faith, not evidence. These defenders would presumably go on to say that faith can work where evidence fails because God is trickier than our minds can fathom; or, as the apostle Paul more eloquently puts it, "God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise" (1 Cor. 1:27). In other words, we believe by faith what science cannot explain or understand. Rationality's arms aren't long enough to box with God -- just ask poor Job. And so, the defenders say, what God tells us simply can't be confirmed or disconfirmed by experiment.

Nonsense, said Dennett in 1995: if we drop the net of rationality, then there are no rules to our discourse and anyone can justify anything by just saying "God told me so." If we are serious about wanting to explain our origins, or our destinations, then the entrance ticket to our discussion is adherence to the basic rules that ground scientific inquiry. Prove it, or at least tell us how it can be disproven; give us the evidence, or show us how what you say fits with the evidence; make sure what you say doesn't contradict something else you want to say; and so on. Without having the net up, Dennett said, our discussion is a "mug's game if there ever was one."

So now in *Breaking the Spell* Dennett shows us how to play with the net up. The game is to ask the same sorts of questions about religion that scientists do about their hypotheses, and with the same honesty and open-mindedness any critical thinker ought to possess. The moral is this: if you want your religion to do some explaining for you, then don't insulate it from your ability to think critically. Let your religious hypothesis play in the big leagues, facing the same tough pitchers all the other hypotheses face. You need not worry; if it is true, it will hold up ... won't it?

But a lot of Dennett's readers will want to stop right here. Who really wants to treat their own religion in the same way we would treat a hypothesis like "Copper is a better conductor than steel"? It's not just that religious believers have an interest in dodging tough questions; it's that the questions seem out of place, like asking for DNA evidence before you send off that Mother's Day card. And there may also be a vague suspicion among religion's defenders – whether they will confess to it or not -- that if Dennett can succeed in getting us all to play with his net up, he's going to win due to a home court advantage; and then the religious team will look as if they have lost, when it wasn't a game they wanted to play to begin with. There is something to this suspicion, as we shall see.

III.

Dennett's "game," so to speak, is a competition over who has the best account of how the world came to be as it is. Was it God, as Genesis says? Or was it blind algorithmic forces, as Dawkins, Dennett, et al. would have it? Once we begin to play that game, Dennett's team has a clear advantage: they can marshal together all (or nearly all) of

contemporary scientific research for support, whereas the defender of religion has but one tired refrain, “The Bible tells me so.” But is this the only game in town?

It shouldn't be. We need only look to the last 150 years of Christian theology -- basically, since the advent of modern biblical hermeneutics -- to get a very different picture of what Christians take to be religion's “game.” 19th-century German scholars saw the demise of Biblical literalism early on and so founded their faith on something else. Theologians followed suit, and nearly all of Protestant theology in the 20th century is an attempt to understand the Bible and Christianity as founded on something other than an old myth about how the world came to be. Unfortunately, this tradition doesn't get much popular press, and I harbor some worry that many Christians out there in America may not even know that this kind of religious approach is available to them.

According to this tradition, religion simply isn't in competition with science. It is the job of science to try to explain the natural forces governing our world, and to construct plausible theories from the best available evidence. But Barth, Bonhoeffer, Bultmann, and Tillich -- the giants of 20th-century Protestant theology -- did not see theology as competing with science. Christianity has a domain of its own, they thought; it is not a science of geology and human origins, but a living testimony of the divinity at the base of our experience (more specifically, of the centrality of the love of Jesus in our lives). It is the job of religion to provide an account of the spiritual foundations of our lives, not to defend an old myth against encroaching scientific theories. There is enough work to go around: it is good to know how the natural world works, and it is good to be assured of guidance and love in times of need.

If this is what religion is all about (or Christianity, anyway), then what problem would there be in affirming the particle physicists' account of the universe's origins? Or in affirming Darwin's account of the origin of species? Or in affirming Dennett's account of the origin of religion? All of these theories give stories about events in history, events you could go see in a time machine. But religions give stories about what's sacred in our lives. There's no way to visit the sacred spot in a time machine; you enter it only in quiet solitude, or with a hymn.

Sometimes, of course, religious stories sound a lot like natural histories, and surely they were once meant to be natural histories, when no more accurate theories were available. But that is not the only reason they were passed along, and it is not why we continue to read them now. We read them now because they enrich our vision of the world and the roles we play in it. Or that's how and why we *should* read them, Robinson urged. Unfortunately, it seems to be wide practice today to read the Bible as one might read a sober account of what's been and what's to come. And – most alarming of all – this seems to be how our most powerful political leaders read the Bible (or at least that's how they pretend to read it). In doing so, they place themselves in a very unfortunate position: they need to either abandon their faith entirely or cover their eyes and ears and refuse to take in what contemporary science and philosophy have to offer. Today's Christians need to know that this is not the only position available to them; they would do well to read some of their own theology from the last century.

Anyway, if religion and science are trying to answer different sets of questions, then the religious person's reluctance to play intellectual tennis with Dennett does make sense. It would be silly for an economist and a physicist to enter into a contest to

determine whose forces are genuinely real, and it would be silly for a poet and a botanist to see who is better at describing the world. Each discipline does just fine with its own designated task. Dennett would win the intellectual tennis match against the religious team, but only when they play on the courts of “tell me how life evolved” and “tell me how religious behavior originated.” When they play instead on “tell me about what is sacred,” Dennett might get skunked.

IV.

Or maybe not. In both *Breaking the Spell* and *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, Dennett also strives to show that all the wonder and beauty of life do not leave the stage when God exits. He explains that we have evolved to have certain values about human life and the world, and to have the intellectual skills to figure out what we need to do to promote those values; and that we have every reason to do what we can to make our lives as meaningful and just as we want them to be. No religion is required for this, Dennett thinks; we are at the point where we can do things for ourselves, not for the sake of our imagined deities.

Now here is where an interesting discussion can take place. What need do we really have for religion? Granted (as we should all have learned by now), it is not needed as a quasi-scientific hypothesis. But is it needed in order to maintain our values? Can those values get enough support from science alone? Or should we reconsider the legitimacy of those values? Should we (as Nietzsche urged) *revalue* them? How should we view our lives, and the significance in them or insignificance of them, given our scientific knowledge? These are indeed some tough questions -- and possibly scary ones

-- and it is truly unfortunate that not many people are raising them. Perhaps it is because they reach so deep that we are avoiding them, both as scholars and as citizens. But we need to raise these questions, if we want to live in the world as we understand it to be. These questions constitute what I would call the real “religious problem”: and so far as I can see, no one has even begun to address it, at least in the public sphere.

But Dennett is right that we will not be able to really raise and discuss the religious problem until we get over religious fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is a dead end, and fighting it just isn't a battle that will profit anyone. The battle makes the stubborn more stubborn, and wastes the efforts of those capable of something more. Let the dead bury their dead. The rest of us need to move on to some important questions about how we should be living in this world. We have some real philosophical questions to think about, and the refusal to think is not doing anyone any good.