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'Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon,' by Daniel C. Dennett

The God Genome

Review by LEON WIESELTIER

THE question of the place of science in human life is not a scientific question. It is a philosophical question. Scientism, the view that science can explain all human conditions and expressions, mental as well as physical, is a superstition, one of the dominant superstitions of our day; and it is not an insult to science to say so. For a sorry instance of present-day scientism, it would be hard to improve on Daniel C. Dennett's book. "Breaking the Spell" is a work of considerable historical interest, because it is a merry anthology of contemporary superstitions.

The orthodoxies of evolutionary psychology are all here, its tiresome way of roaming widely but never leaving its house, its legendary curiosity that somehow always discovers the same thing. The excited materialism of American society — I refer not to the American creed of shopping, according to which a person's qualities may be known by a person's brands, but more ominously to the adoption by American culture of biological, economic and technological ways of describing the purposes of human existence — abounds in Dennett's usefully uninhibited pages. And Dennett's book is also a document of the intellectual havoc of our infamous polarization, with its widespread and deeply damaging assumption that the most extreme statement of an idea is its most genuine statement. Dennett lives in a world in which you must believe in the grossest biologism or in the grossest theism, in a purely naturalistic understanding of religion or in intelligent design, in the omniscience of a white man with a long beard in 19th-century England or in the omniscience of a white man with a long beard in the sky.

In his own opinion, Dennett is a hero. He is in the business of emancipation, and he reveres himself for it. "By asking for an accounting of the pros and cons of religion, I risk getting poked in the nose or worse," he declares, "and yet I persist." Giordano Bruno, with tenure at Tufts! He wonders whether religious people "will have the intellectual honesty and courage to read this book through." If you disagree with what Dennett says, it is because you fear what he says. Any opposition to his scientific deflation of religion he triumphantly dismisses as "protectionism." But people who share Dennett's view of the world he calls "brights." Brights are not only intellectually better, they are also ethically better. Did you know that "brights have the lowest divorce rate in the United States, and born-again Christians the highest"? Dennett's own "sacred values" are "democracy, justice, life, love and truth." This rigs things nicely. If you refuse his "impeccably hardheaded and rational ontology," then your sacred values must be tyranny, injustice, death, hatred and falsehood. Dennett is the sort of rationalist who gives reason a bad name; and in a new era of American obscurantism, this is not helpful.

Dennett flatters himself that he is Hume's heir. Hume began "The Natural History of Religion," a short incendiary work that was published in 1757, with this remark: "As every enquiry which regards religion is of the utmost importance, there are two questions in particular which challenge our attention, to wit, that concerning its foundation in reason, and that concerning its origin in human nature." These words serve as the epigraph to Dennett's introduction to his own con-

ception of “religion as a natural phenomenon.” “Breaking the Spell” proposes to answer Hume’s second question, not least as a way of circumventing Hume’s first question. Unfortunately, Dennett gives a misleading impression of Hume’s reflections on religion. He chooses not to reproduce the words that immediately follow those in which he has just basked: “Happily, the first question, which is the most important, admits of the most obvious, at least, the clearest, solution. The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author; and no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion.”

So was Hume not a bright? I do not mean to be pedantic. Hume deplored religion as a source of illusions and crimes, and renounced its consolations even as he was dying. His God was a very wan god. But his God was still a god; and so his theism is as true or false as any other theism. The truth of religion cannot be proved by showing that a skeptic was in his way a believer, or by any other appeal to authority. There is no intellectually honorable surrogate for rational argument. Dennett’s misrepresentation of Hume (and his similar misrepresentation of William James and Thomas Nagel) is noteworthy, therefore, because it illustrates his complacent refusal to acknowledge the dense and vital relations between religion and reason, not only historically but also philosophically.

For Dennett, thinking historically absolves one of thinking philosophically. Is the theistic account of the cosmos true or false? Dennett, amazingly, does not care. “The goal of either proving or disproving God’s existence,” he concludes, is “not very important.” It is history, not philosophy, that will break religion’s spell. The story of religion’s development will extirpate it. “In order to explain the hold that various religious ideas and practices have on people,” he writes, “we need to understand the evolution of the human mind.” What follows is, in brief, Dennett’s natural history of religion. It begins with the elementary assertion that “everything that moves needs something like a mind, to keep it out of harm’s way and help it find the good things.” To this end, there arose in very ancient times the evolutionary adaptation that one researcher has called a “hyperactive agent detection device, or HADD.” This cognitive skill taught us, or a very early version of us, that we live in a world of other minds — and taught us too well, because it instilled “the urge to treat things — especially frustrating things — as agents with beliefs and desires.” This urge is “deeply rooted in human biology,” and it results in a “fantasy-generation process” that left us “finding agency wherever anything puzzles or frightens us.”

Eventually this animism issued in deities, who were simply the “agents who had access to all the strategic information” that we desperately lacked. “But what good to us is the gods’ knowledge if we can’t get it from them?” So eventually shamans arose who told us what we wanted to hear from the gods, and did so by means of hypnosis. (Our notion of God is the product of this “hypnotizability-enabler” in our brains, and it may even be that theism is owed to a “gene for heightened hypnotizability,” which would be an acceptable version of a “God gene.”) To secure these primitive constructs and comforts against oblivion, ritual was invented; and they were further secured by “acts of deceit” that propounded their “systematic invulnerability to disproof.” Folk religions became organized religions. The “trade secrets” of the shamans were transmitted to “every priest and minister, every imam and rabbi.” Slowly and steadily, these “trade secrets” were given the more comprehensive protection of “belief in belief,” the idea that certain convictions are so significant that they must be insulated from the pressures of reason. “The belief that

belief in God is so important that it must not be subjected to the risks of disconfirmation or serious criticism,” Dennett instructs, “has led the devout to ‘save’ their beliefs by making them incomprehensible even to themselves.” In sum, we were HADD. Here endeth the lesson.

There are a number of things that must be said about this story. The first is that it is only a story. It is not based, in any strict sense, on empirical research. Dennett is “extrapolating back to human prehistory with the aid of biological thinking,” nothing more. “Breaking the Spell” is a fairy tale told by evolutionary biology. There is no scientific foundation for its scientific narrative. Even Dennett admits as much: “I am not at all claiming that this is what science has established about religion. . . . We don’t yet know.” So all of Dennett’s splashy allegiance to evidence and experiment and “generating further testable hypotheses” notwithstanding, what he has written is just an extravagant speculation based upon his hope for what is the case, a pious account of his own atheistic longing.

And why is Dennett so certain that the origins of a thing are the most illuminating features of a thing, or that a thing is forever as primitive as its origins? Has Dennett never seen a flower grow from the dust? Or is it the dust that he sees in a flower? “Breaking the Spell” is a long, hectoring exercise in unexamined originalism. In perhaps the most flattening passage in the book, Dennett surmises that “all our ‘intrinsic’ values started out as instrumental values,” and that this conviction about the primacy of the instrumental is a solemn requirement of science. He remarks that the question *cui bono?* — who benefits? — “is even more central in evolutionary biology than in the law,” and so we must seek the biological utilities of what might otherwise seem like “a gratuitous outlay.” An anxiety about the reality of nonbiological meanings troubles Dennett’s every page. But it is very hard to envisage the biological utilities of such gratuitous outlays as “The Embarkation for Cythera” and Fermat’s theorem and the “Missa Solemnis.”

It will be plain that Dennett’s approach to religion is contrived to evade religion’s substance. He thinks that an inquiry into belief is made superfluous by an inquiry into the belief in belief. This is a very revealing mistake. You cannot disprove a belief unless you disprove its content. If you believe that you can disprove it any other way, by describing its origins or by describing its consequences, then you do not believe in reason. In this profound sense, Dennett does not believe in reason. He will be outraged to hear this, since he regards himself as a giant of rationalism. But the reason he imputes to the human creatures depicted in his book is merely a creaturely reason. Dennett’s natural history does not deny reason, it animalizes reason. It portrays reason in service to natural selection, and as a product of natural selection. But if reason is a product of natural selection, then how much confidence can we have in a rational argument for natural selection? The power of reason is owed to the independence of reason, and to nothing else. (In this respect, rationalism is closer to mysticism than it is to materialism.) Evolutionary biology cannot invoke the power of reason even as it destroys it.

Like many biological reductionists, Dennett is sure that he is not a biological reductionist. But the charge is proved as early as the fourth page of his book. Watch closely. “Like other animals,” the confused passage begins, “we have built-in desires to reproduce and to do pretty much whatever it takes to achieve this goal.” No confusion there, and no offense. It is incontrovertible that we are animals. The sentence continues: “But we also have creeds, and the ability to trans-

end our genetic imperatives.” A sterling observation, and the beginning of humanism. And then more, in the same fine antideterministic vein: “This fact does make us different.”

Then suddenly there is this: “But it is itself a biological fact, visible to natural science, and something that requires an explanation from natural science.” As the ancient rabbis used to say, have your ears heard what your mouth has spoken? Dennett does not see that he has taken his humanism back. Why is our independence from biology a fact of biology? And if it is a fact of biology, then we are not independent of biology. If our creeds are an expression of our animality, if they require an explanation from natural science, then we have not transcended our genetic imperatives. The human difference, in Dennett’s telling, is a difference in degree, not a difference in kind — a doctrine that may quite plausibly be called biological reductionism.

Dennett is unable to imagine a fact about us that is not a biological fact. His book is riddled with translations of emotions and ideas into evo-psychobabble. “It is in the genetic interests of parents . . . to inform — not misinform — their young, so it is efficient (and relatively safe) to trust one’s parents.” Grief for the death of a loved one is “a major task of cognitive updating: revising all our habits of thought to fit a world with one less familiar intentional system in it.” “Marriage rituals and taboos against adultery, clothing and hairstyles, breath fresheners and pornography and condoms and H.I.V. and all the rest” have their “ancient but ongoing source” in the organism’s need to thwart parasites. “The phenomenon of romantic love” may be adequately understood by reference to “the unruly marketplace of human mate-finding.” And finally, the general rule: “Everything we value — from sugar and sex and money to music and love and religion — we value for reasons. Lying behind, and distinct from, our reasons are evolutionary reasons, free-floating rationales that have been endorsed by natural selection.” Never mind the merits of materialism as an analysis of the world. As an attitude to life, it represents a collapse of wisdom. So steer clear of “we materialists” in your dark hours. They cannot fortify you, say, after the funeral of a familiar intentional system.

BEFORE there were naturalist superstitions, there were supernaturalist superstitions. The crudities of religious myth are plentiful, and a sickening amount of savagery has been perpetrated in their name. Yet the excesses of naturalism cannot hide behind the excesses of supernaturalism. Or more to the point, the excesses of naturalism cannot live without the excesses of supernaturalism. Dennett actually prefers folk religion to intellectual religion, because it is nearer to the instinctual mire that enchants him. The move “away from concrete anthropomorphism to ever more abstract and depersonalized concepts,” or the increasing philosophical sophistication of religion over the centuries, he views only as “strategic belief-maintenance.” He cannot conceive of a thoughtful believer. He writes often, and with great indignation, of religion’s strictures against doubts and criticisms, when in fact the religious traditions are replete with doubts and criticisms. Dennett is unacquainted with the distinction between fideism and faith. Like many of the fundamentalists whom he despises, he is a literalist in matters of religion.

But why must we read literally in the realm of religion, when in so many other realms of human expression we read metaphorically, allegorically, symbolically, figuratively, analogically? We see kernels and husks everywhere. There are concepts in many of the fables of faith, philosophical propositions about the nature of the universe. They may be right or they may be wrong, but they are there. Dennett recognizes the uses of faith, but not its reasons. In the end, his repudia-

tion of religion is a repudiation of philosophy, which is also an affair of belief in belief. What this shallow and self-congratulatory book establishes most conclusively is that there are many spells that need to be broken.

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