

STUDI

# In Defense of Avuncularity. Dennett and Harris on the Relation between Philosophy and Science

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**Abstract** This metacomment on Daniel Dennett's comment on Sam Harris's book on free will (or the lack it) examines two issues. First, how one should conceive of the relationship between philosophy and science, in particular considering the dismissive attitude many highly regarded scientists show towards philosophy today. Second, a critical assessment of Harris's replies to Dennett's criticisms.

KEYWORDS: Daniel Dennett; Sam Harris; Free Will; Science; Philosophy

**Riassunto** *In difesa dei vincoli avuncolari. Dennett e Harris sul rapporto tra filosofia e scienza* – Questo metacommento sulle osservazioni avanzate da Daniel Dennett sul libro di Sam Harris sul libero arbitrio (o sulla sua assenza) verte su due questioni. In primo luogo, discute come si dovrebbe concepire il rapporto tra filosofia e scienza, in particolar modo considerando l'atteggiamento sprezzante mostrato oggi nei confronti della filosofia da diversi scienziati molto in vista. In secondo luogo saranno oggetto di valutazione critica le risposte di Harris alle critiche di Dennett.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Daniel Dennett; Sam Harris; Libero arbitrio; Scienza; Filosofia



IN THIS METACOMMENT ON DAN Dennett's comment on Sam Harris's book on free will (or on the lack it), I will touch upon two issues: (i) how one should conceive of the relationship between philosophy and science and (relatedly) (ii) Harris's replies to Dennett's criticisms.

## Philosophy and Science

The idea that science and philosophy are precisely separated, if not wholly unrelated, disciplines is relatively new. Beginning with the ancient Ionian philosophers up until the

end of the Renaissance, science and philosophy were not clearly distinguished at all; and until the end of the XVIII century the vast majority of philosophers still took into great consideration in what the scientists of their own times had to say (Kant, for example, was extremely interested in physics, mathematics, chemistry, biology and astronomy).<sup>1</sup>

However, with the growth of idealism and historicism, a diminishing attitude toward the intellectual relevance of science spread rapidly over continental Europe – with Hegel, Heidegger, and the French postmodernists being the most obvious examples of this

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trend. Then, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the estrangement of philosophy from science became common in analytic philosophy, especially by virtue of the strict anti-psychologism of its founding fathers: Frege, Russell, Moore, Wittgenstein, and Carnap.

For many years, Dennett – together with Quine, Putnam, Fodor and some others, and perhaps more effectively than them – has been one of the advocates of a scientific turn in philosophy. For example, in *Freedom Evolves* Dennett wrote that philosophers «cannot claim to be doing their professional duty unless they pay careful attention to the thinking of psychologists..., economists..., biologists».<sup>2</sup> Indeed, according to him, the most important goal of philosophy is that of clarifying «the often warring perspectives [of the sciences] into a single vision of the universe».<sup>3</sup>

In the recent years, however, the situation has radically changed, since many philosophers have now gone back to the classic notion that a thorough acquaintance with scientific results and theories is relevant, and often indispensable, for their work. This is particularly true in the field of philosophy of mind (Dennett's main field, even if by no means the only one). Contemporary philosophical publications on, say, the mind-body problem, consciousness, free will, normative ethics, or self-deception are filled with references to results and ideas coming from cognitive psychology, neuroscience, genetics, and the theory of evolution; and the few philosophers who keep objecting to the use of those references are now seen as obscurantists. In this sense, one could say that Dennett has won his almost fifty-year long battle against anti-scientific philosophy.

End of the story, then? Unfortunately not. If one looks at today's academic and non-academic literature on the issues traditionally considered of philosophical interest, one notices a paradoxical side effect of the scientific turn. In fact, in the last few years a new attitude has become extremely common: that of treating philosophical questions, even the classic

ones, as pseudo-problems, most often generated by commonsense illusory beliefs methodically cultivated by philosophers over the ages.

This may sound like a Wittgensteinian tune, but it isn't; rather, it's a paleopositivist tune. The idea is that only those phenomena that can be directly treated by science are real, and they're real only insofar as science can treat them: everything else is an illusion that we should eradicate. And this means that many features of reality that philosophy has been dealing with for centuries are considered either partially or completely illusory. As Dennett writes in the article published here,

[Today] there are maddog reductionist neuroscientists and philosophers who insist that minds are illusions, pains are illusions, dreams are illusions, ideas are illusions – all there is is just neurons and glia and the like.<sup>4</sup>

And, looking at the more specific question of free will, Dennett notes that a deeply skeptic attitude is nowadays shared by

Such heavyweight scientists as the neuroscientists Wolf Singer and Chris Frith, the psychologists Steven Pinker and Paul Bloom, the physicists Stephen Hawking and Albert Einstein, and the evolutionary biologists Jerry Coyne and (when he's not thinking carefully) Richard Dawkins.<sup>5</sup>

Also, Sam Harris – who, while mostly a public intellectual, holds a PhD in cognitive neuroscience from UCLA and can thus be considered a scientist – is skeptical regarding free will (and moral responsibility). But before saying something about Harris's skeptical views, I want to say something about why skepticism in respect to so many crucial commonsense and philosophical issues has become so widespread today.

In my view, the main cause of this intellectual phenomenon is a strong, and very unfortunate, anti-philosophical attitude that has become common in the last few years, both in academia and in the general media. Think, for

example, of the most famous living cosmologist, Stephen Hawking, who has frequently expressed in a straightforward way the idea that philosophy is dead. Analogously, another world-famous physicist, Freeman Dyson, offered a sort of manifesto of this strong anti-philosophical attitude, in a review published in the *New York Review of Books*.

Referring to the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century philosophers, Dyson stated that,

compared with the giants of the past, they are a sorry bunch of dwarfs. They are thinking deep thoughts and giving scholarly lectures to academic audiences, but hardly anybody in the world outside is listening. They are historically insignificant. At some time toward the end of the nineteenth century, philosophers faded from public life. Like the snark in Lewis Carroll's poem, they suddenly and silently vanished. So far as the general public was concerned, philosophers became invisible.<sup>6</sup>

It may come as a surprise to the recently appointed bunch of dwarfs that Dyson plainly ignores that, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there *have* been a few philosophers who have actually had a strong influence on public opinion, and so should be counted as Giants, according to Dyson's definitions (here one can think of Bertrand Russell, Henri Bergson, Jean-Paul Sartre, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Derrida, and John Rawls).

In any case, if one only focuses on the last couple of decades, Dyson has a point, since it is undeniable that most recently philosophy has lost a good part of its intellectual credentials, above all in the United States, but more and more elsewhere as well. Nowadays, a very small handful of philosophers still have audiences in the non-academic world; moreover, they tend not to be from the younger generation. If one takes a controversial, but still indicative, list of the 50 most famous living philosophers published in the website "The Best Schools",<sup>7</sup> one actually notices

that, with very few exceptions (such as Habermas, Butler, Singer, Nussbaum, West, Singer, the same Dennett and, of course, the unstoppable Žižek), they aren't known outside academic circles.

As Dennett has noted many times, philosophers themselves share part of the responsibility for the present delegitimation of their discipline. On the one hand, the general public still sometimes listens to the voices of continental thinkers, but often the price of this audience is an undesirable lowering of the standards of rigor. On the other hand, most analytic philosophers, locked in their ivory tower, keep discussing very esoteric issues (such as the ontological status of impossibilia, the *n*<sup>th</sup> version of the Frankfurt cases, or the thesis that subatomic particles may have consciousness), and manifest a total incapacity (or lack of will) to connect with the external world – and not only with the world outside academia, but also with the rest of the academic community!

However, besides the faults of its practitioners, the contemporary misfortune of philosophy can also be attributed to another cause – and a more important one, in my view. Taken at its best, contemporary philosophy is difficult, much more difficult than in the past, and one has to study it very patiently, and not just when one intends to contribute to the advancement of the discipline, but also when one simply wants to understand what is going on in the field. Whoever tries to discuss philosophical issues, without being adequately prepared, will unavoidably say things that in the eyes of well-trained philosophers look shallow, irrelevant, embarrassingly naïve or plainly wrong.

This may appear a trivial statement, but, unfortunately, these days it is far from being generally acknowledged. In fact, many scholars, especially old and glorious natural scientists – i.e. Dyson's Giants – treat philosophy as a relic of the past, a discipline devoted to hair-splitting analyses, useless distinctions, and infinite caveats. As a consequence, Dyson's Giants try to philosophize without any

specific training, only on the basis of their common sense, high IQ, self-confidence, and, in the best cases, with the help of few amateurish quasi-philosophical readings.

This attitude, unsurprisingly, is hopelessly naïve. One cannot seriously talk, or even understand, philosophy without having studied it more than one can talk topology, Phoenician history or microbiology without having spent enough time and energy on the relevant textbooks. This obvious remark notwithstanding, a very dismissive view of philosophy is increasingly spreading, and its very doubtful results are before our eyes.<sup>8</sup>

I am not saying, of course, that contemporary science doesn't raise a lot of legitimate and important epistemological, metaphysical, methodological, and ethical questions. As Dennett wrote with his usual clarity,

there is no such thing as philosophy-free science, there is only science whose philosophical baggage is taken on board without examination.<sup>9</sup>

To give some examples, some philosophically-laden questions that derive from the best contemporary science are: "What is a biological species?"; "Can quantum mechanics be given a deterministic interpretation?"; "What is the epistemological value of string theory?"; "Is time an objective feature of the universe?"; "How should one study mental qualitative phenomena"; or "Should we put moral limits to genetic engineering?". Some of these questions are mostly of philosophical interest; others are also very relevant for science itself. But addressing these questions presupposes an adequate scientific and philosophical background, otherwise the results are, unavoidably, going to be laughable.

The conclusion of these premises is obvious. Today, many leading scientists (especially in their later years) try to answer questions like the ones mentioned above – which are philosophical in nature – without being able to manage the tools that are necessary to performing that task properly.

Earlier I mentioned Hawking's obituary for philosophy – a very unfortunate statement indeed, since his own books often discuss philosophical issues (in naïve ways). As noted by Tim Crane, for example the ambitious book *The Grand Design*, written by Hawking together with Leonard Mlodinow,

contains a large amount of argument in defence of its own metaphysics (i.e. its theory of reality) and its philosophy of science. [The point of the book is] that the discipline of academic philosophy is dead because it 'has not kept up with modern developments in science, particularly physics'. Unfortunately, much of the book's own philosophical argument is of a very low standard, and shows a striking lack of reflection on the complexities of what is being claimed.<sup>10</sup>

The lack of philosophical preparation can explain why most of Dyson's Giants hurry to endorse the radical attitude mentioned above, according to which philosophical problems are pseudo-problems that merely refer to illusory phenomena. Of course, some of these phenomena may really be illusions: but in order to draw such a radical conclusion, one needs adequate argumentations that, unfortunately, our Giants are not able to offer.

Freeman Dyson, the above-mentioned Giant, offers an enlightening example of how simplistic the illusionary approach to philosophy is. This what he thinks of the free will problem:

There is a certain kind of freedom that atoms have to jump around and they seem to choose entirely on their own without any input from the outside. So in a certain sense atoms have free will. That is, to my mind, probably connected with the fact that we have free will [...] It could be that [when we make a choice] we are actually using the freedom that quantum mechanics allows.<sup>11</sup>

In this passage, Dyson suggests the sim-

plest solution to the venerable problem of free will – a problem “upon whose desperate and unconquerable theories so many fine heads have been turned and cracked”, as Laurence Sterne wisely put it in his *Tristram Shandy*. But, as it is well known, frequently simplicity comes at the price of sloppiness – or naiveté altogether.

During the Fall term of 2016, I was teaching a course on free will at Tufts, and during a test I showed the students a video by Freeman Dyson that also contained the above-mentioned passage, asking them to comment on it. They all accurately detected several big mistakes – including the most obvious one, that indeterminism cannot be equated to freedom – plus many inaccuracies. One of the students even wrote that, considering Dyson’s kind of argumentation, he would never pass an undergraduate exam on free will.

There are many examples like these nowadays, of honored scientists who presume to be able to solve venerable philosophical questions, even if they know nothing about the relevant philosophical discussions. The results are discouraging. The obvious moral of this story is that the Giants shouldn’t ignore what the dwarfs have to say, when they deal with dwarfish problems.

### ■ About Harris’ reply to Dennett’s criticism

No doubt that Harris knows philosophy better than Dyson and Hawking (not just because they set a low standard, but because Harris got a B.A. in philosophy from Stanford); still, he appears to share with them a dismissive attitude towards this discipline. For example, in replying to Dennett’s commentary on his book, he grumbles that it’s far too long and articulated:

I was hoping to spare our readers a feeling of boredom that surpasseth all understanding [...] As I expected, our exchange will now be far less interesting or useful than a conversation/debate would have been. Trading 10,000-word essays is simply not

the best way to get to the bottom of things.<sup>12</sup>

Notice: Harris wants to get to the bottom of things, but in a fast and entertaining way. Most likely, he wouldn’t ask for that way of proceeding if the discussion, instead of regarding a philosophical issue, concerned the evaluation of a scientific experiment. In that case, nobody would doubt that one has to be extra-careful and patient. Why not in the case of philosophy? Why should philosophical discussions pass the test of the general reader amusement?

Harris also adds that if Dennett, instead of writing 10,000 words of criticisms of his work, had simply talked with him in person, many misunderstandings would have been clarified, thus avoiding a long and boring public discussion. This is puzzling, however, since certainly one cannot claim that Dennett is a naïve reader. So, if he really misinterpreted Harris’s book, wouldn’t it be useful to explain where and why he got it wrong? Wouldn’t the normal reader be helped to avoid Dennett’s mistakes?

At any rate, in his comment on Harris’s book, Dennett raises many different criticisms. In my view the most important are the following two: (i) Harris does not have an adequate understanding of compatibilism, so that his criticisms towards this view are ineffective; and (ii) paradoxically enough, Harris’s view has a strong, if unperceived, Cartesian component. In his reply, Harris tries to answer these objections (and some of the minor ones). In my view, however, his attempts do not succeed for exactly the reason discussed above, i.e. he isn’t careful enough, or not patient enough, to spell out the many philosophical subtleties of this discussion.

On issue (i), that of compatibilism, in *Free Will* Harris claims that such a conception looks “deliberately obtuse”.<sup>13</sup> Here Harris is deliberately mocking the philosophical community, since compatibilism is the most common view of free will among philosophers. Then, surprisingly, he adds that

Compatibilism amounts to nothing more than an assertion of the following creed: A puppet is free as long as he loves his strings.<sup>14</sup>

The latter remark is strange, since the “creed” he describes – expressed with the Latin motto *amor fati* – was used as a manifesto-slogan by Nietzsche, a staunch advocate of incompatibilism (the view logically opposed to compatibilism), and it could be applied correctly to other adamant incompatibilists such as Calvin, Spinoza and Schopenhauer. Arguing that this creed correctly describes the compatibilist position is irrevocably wrong.

As Dennett notices, Harris’s main argument against compatibilism is that this view is at odds with the common sense intuition of free will. Dennett responds that, even if one granted that this statement was correct (which is not obvious), this would not be a problem for a philosophical analysis. As a matter of fact, very often the most important philosophical views are partially or entirely revisionist: think of the Epicurean-Galilean-Lockean view that secondary qualities are not out there in the world, Hume’s view of personal identity, or Putnam and Kripke’s semantic externalism.

Dennett patiently spells out the mistakes of Harris’s simplistic view about the “possibility to do otherwise” condition for free will. But to this Harris responds by mentioning his alleged argument against compatibilism:

You think that compatibilists like yourself have purified the concept of free will by “deliberately using cleaned-up, demystified substitutes for the folk concepts.” I believe that you have changed the subject and are now ignoring the very phenomenon we should be talking about – the common, felt sense that I/he/she/you *could have done otherwise* (generally known as “libertarian” or “contra-causal” free will), with all its moral implications. The legitimacy of your attempting to make free will “presentable” by performing conceptual surgery on it is

our main point of contention. Whether or not I can convince you of the speciousness of the compatibilist project, I hope we can agree in the abstract that there is a difference between thinking more clearly about a phenomenon and (wittingly or unwittingly) thinking about something else. I intend to show that you are doing the latter.<sup>15</sup>

Harris’s point is that his discussion is really focused on the folk concept of free will, not on the highly-contrived philosophical view called “compatibilism”. But if this is so, his book is wildly less ambitious than it may appear *prima facie*. This is because the vast majority of competent writers who have written about free will agree that the commonsense view of free will cannot be right. And this is true not just for the advocates of compatibilism, but also for the most serious incompatibilists, like Kant (who sees that libertarian free will requires conditions that cannot be given in the phenomenal world) or Derk Pereboom (who, before denying free will, criticizes in much detail the best versions of compatibilism and libertarianism). So, Harris faces a problem here: if he’s really criticizing the commonsense view of free will, he’s reinventing the wheel. However, the alternative is not promising, since clearly Harris is not addressing in a serious way any sophisticated version of compatibilism.

In general, Harris does not seem to get the deep philosophical point that is really at issue here. In reference to Dennett’s criticism of the cover of his book, he writes,

You write that you were especially dismayed by the cover of my book, which depicts a puppet theater. This cover image is justified because I argue that each of us is moved by chance and necessity, just as a marionette is set dancing on its strings. But I never suggest that this is the same as being manipulated by a human puppeteer who overrides our actual beliefs and desires and obliges us to behave in ways we do not intend.<sup>16</sup>

It's true that the reason why the cover of Harris's book dismays a professional philosopher like Dennett is that it very simplistically equates rational beings to marionettes. But this is not only, and not even mostly, because marionettes have a puppeteer, but because we cannot attribute any intentional states to a marionette that could be assumed to be cause, or co-causes, of its deliberations, choices, and actions (and actually one could not even sensibly say that marionettes ever deliberate, choose or act, exactly because we cannot intentional states to them).

Compatibilists have no problems with the idea that agents' beliefs, desires, intentions etc. are determined; but they aren't happy at all with the idea that these mental states – which of course are identical to some physical states – do not play any role in the causal structure of the world. If one assumes that this view is not relevant in a philosophical discussion on free will (since allegedly this discussion should only concern the common sense view), one is simply neglecting the real focus of the discussion. Dennett also notices several times Harris's odd Cartesian language and way of arguing:

Like many before him, Harris shrinks the me to a dimensionless point, "the witness" who is stuck in the Cartesian Theater awaiting the decisions made elsewhere. That is simply a bad theory of consciousness.<sup>17</sup>

Harris is far from being the only one that makes this mistake. In the non-philosophically-accurate literature, there are plenty of references to "brains that deceive us". But who this "us" could ever be is far from being clear, unless, of course, one is not an ontological dualist. However, like many others, Harris does not seem convinced (one wonders why) that this a kind of language that non-Cartesian thinkers should carefully avoid.

## ■ Concluding remarks

In preparing this article, I bumped into Da-

vid Papineau's harsh review of Dennett's, *From Bacteria to Bach and Back Again* published in the *Times Literary Supplement*. I cannot of course discuss that review here, but I want to make two remarks regarding it. First, Papineau criticizes Dennett views for being based on allegedly obsolete philosophical views:

If only we would free ourselves from outmoded myths, and open ourselves to the latest discoveries, he repeatedly assures us, we would be able to see things as he and his scientific allies do. Readers should be wary of this rhetoric. In truth Dennett's distinctive views are by no means common currency among the scientific experts [...] This is not to say that Dennett's theses are pulled out of thin air. They have the backing of a developed theoretical framework. But this framework owes far more to Dennett's long-standing philosophical commitments than to his familiarity with the latest science.<sup>18</sup>

Notice that Papineau's charge is that nowadays most "scientific experts" do not share Dennett's "long-standing" philosophical views (especially his Rylean inspiration). Once more, one wonders why the "scientific experts" – the Giants, again! – should be given the last word in judging a philosophical view. Be that as it may, in Papineau's world there seems to be no room left for the dwarfs – even the tallest ones, such as Dennett. Papineau also writes that «a series of enthusiastic media profiles have presented [Dennett] as a kind of avuncular alternative to Richard Dawkins». <sup>19</sup> This sounds very much like a passage of Harris's, where he writes that Dennett's comment on *Free Will* «is a strange document, avuncular in places, but more generally sneering». <sup>20</sup>

Papineau and Harris use the adjective "avuncular" in a sarcastic way, of course, to stress the idea that Dennett's humorous and benign style is just a cover for an old-fashioned philosophers who, uncle-like, keep presenting his obsolete reasons, in a world in

which science alone is going to dissolve (if it hasn't already dissolved) all philosophical conundrums.

Let me conclude this paper, then, by paraphrasing Mortimer Collins's words: "If there were *more uncles like Dan Dennett*, it would improve the breed of nephews".<sup>21</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See E. WATKINS, M. STAN, *Kant's Philosophy of Science*, in: E.N. ZALTA (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2014, available at URL: <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-science/>>.

<sup>2</sup> D.C. DENNETT, *Freedom Evolves*, Viking, New York 2003, pp. 306-307.

<sup>3</sup> *Ivi*, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> D.C. DENNETT, *Reflections on Sam Harris' "Free Will"*, in: «Rivista internazionale di Filosofia e Psicologia», vol. VIII, n. 3, 2017, pp. 214-230, here p. 217.

<sup>5</sup> *Ivi*, p. 215.

<sup>6</sup> F. DYSON, *What Can You Really Know?*, in: «New York Review of Books», November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2012 (book-review of T. HOLT, *Why Does the World Exist?: An Existential Detective Story*, Profile Books, London 2012), available at URL: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2012/11/08/what-can-you-really-know/>.

<sup>7</sup> Website available at the URL: <<https://thebestschools.org/features/most-influential-living-philosophers/>>.

<sup>8</sup> There are, of course, some exceptions to that, i.e. scientists that, as Dennett puts it, "have done their homework", by patiently studying the relevant philosophical literature before trying to answer philosophical questions: Lee Smolin, Patrick Haggard,

Martha Farah, Carlo Rovelli, and Amartya Sen are some examples of this virtuous attitude.

<sup>9</sup> D.C. DENNETT, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea. Evolution and the Meanings of Life*, Simon & Schuster, New York 1995, p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> T. CRANE, *Philosophy, Science and the Value of Understanding*, 2015, available at URL: <[http://www.timcrane.com/uploads/2/5/2/4/25243881/philosophy\\_science\\_and\\_understanding.pdf](http://www.timcrane.com/uploads/2/5/2/4/25243881/philosophy_science_and_understanding.pdf)>.

<sup>11</sup> F. DYSON, *Could Atomic Science Explain Free Will?*, 2010, available at URL: <<http://bigthink.com/videos/could-atomic-science-explain-free-will/>>.

<sup>12</sup> S. HARRIS, *The Marionette's Lament. A Response to Daniel Dennett*, 2014, available at URL: <<https://www.samharris.org/blog/item/the-marionettes-lament>>.

<sup>13</sup> S. HARRIS, *Free Will*, Freedom Press, New York 2012, p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> *Ivi*, p. 20.

<sup>15</sup> S. HARRIS, *The Marionette's Lament*, cit.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> D.C. DENNETT, *Reflections on Sam Harris' "Free Will"*, cit., p. 222.

<sup>18</sup> D. PAPINEAU, *Competence without Comprehension*, in: «Times Literary Supplement», June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2017, available at URL: <<http://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/competence-without-comprehension-dennett/>>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> S. HARRIS, *The Marionette's Lament*, cit.

<sup>21</sup> The exact avuncular quote goes: «If there were *more uncles like you*, it would improve the breed of nephews» (see R.T. COTTON, *Mr. Carington. A Tale of Love and Conspiracy*, in: «The Saint Paul Magazine», vol. XIII, 1873, p. 465 - Edward James Mortimer Collins wrote that novel under the pseudonym of Robert Turner Cotton).