

IN MEMORIAM

Remembering Daniel Dennett

Mario De Caro^(a)

IN A SENSE, DANIEL DENNETT was a traditional philosopher. His pedigree from this point of view appears impeccable: a degree from Harvard with Willard Van Orman Quine, the greatest postwar American philosopher, and a doctorate from Oxford with Gilbert Ryle, the British champion of anti-Cartesianism. Deep traces of the influence of these two masters can be traced throughout Dennett's intellectual itinerary. But he was also a traditional philosopher in a different sense, one that is very uncommon today: far from specializing in a single field of philosophy, if not even in a single philosophical problem (as is very often the case today), Dennett devoted himself with great competence to a multiplicity of fields: from the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of science to epistemology and the philosophy of language, from metaphilosophy and the philosophy of neuroscience to metaphysics and the philosophy of religion (understood from a fully secular perspective).

Nevertheless, Dennett was also a profoundly innovative thinker. Consider, for example, his uncompromising naturalism. In his view, for example, discussions of philosophical problems should never ignore the contributions that can come from the sciences, particularly evolutionary biology, neuroscience, computer science and cognitive psychology: and so his writings overflow with up-to-date references to the acquisitions of the frontier sciences. Nor should his direct contributions to scientific research be forgotten. Consider, for example, his famous and controversial volume *Consciousness explained* (DENNETT 1991), which has become a landmark of scientific studies on

consciousness, as well as of philosophical ones. Or consider his contribution to the field of artificial intelligence, particularly with the short but highly influential article *Why not the whole iguana?* (DENNETT 1978), in which he urged scientists to explore a new direction of research, which would later be very successful: instead of continuing to focus on particular aspects of human intelligence (from logical-mathematical abilities to the ability to play chess), it would be much more fruitful, Dennett argued, to investigate organisms less complex than we are – such as, indeed, iguanas – because it would be possible to investigate their intelligence as a whole.

From these remarks it would be wrong, however, to conclude that Dennett agreed with the many who today argue that philosophy should essentially annihilate itself into natural science, of which it would be nothing more than a pale copy. In his view, philosophy is not something that can eradicate from our conceptual system; rather, it is inherently intertwined with it. Furthermore, he believed that philosophy is an intrinsic component of science itself: «there is no such thing as philosophy-free science, there is only science whose philosophical baggage is taken on board without examination» (DENNETT 1995, p. 21).

Those who have met Daniel Dennett in person will never forget him. His imposing, even somewhat intimidating physique was softened by a jovial face, framed by a long, thick white beard that made him indistinguishable from the prototypical image of Santa Claus: a fact, this, that he himself liked to joke about. For Dennett was like that: he commanded

^(a)Dipartimento di Filosofia, Comunicazione, Spettacolo, Università degli Studi Roma Tre, via Ostiense, 234 – Roma (IT)

great intellectual respect, but at the same time he was good-natured and extremely generous.

Personally, having taught part of the year in his department at Tufts University for a long time, I got to know him well and to appreciate, in addition to his obvious philosophical genius, his resounding general culture, his human sympathy (he had a very sophisticated sense of humor), as well as – and this surprised me greatly – an extraordinary manual dexterity: in addition to being an excellent sailor, in fact, Dennett was also an excellent handyman, very skilled at do-it-yourself. Moreover, as if that were not enough, he also had artistic talent: as a young man he had even pursued a career as a sculptor. For this reason, in his

early youth, he came to Italy to apprentice with the well-known artist Pietro Consagra (and during that time he also learned Italian), before finally converting to philosophy. Then, perhaps, the world lost a good sculptor; certainly, however, it gained an excellent philosopher.

■ Literature

- DENNETT, D.C. (1978). *Why not the whole iguana?*. In: «Behavioral and Brain Sciences», vol. I, n. 1, pp. 103-104.
- DENNETT, D.C. (1991). *Consciousness explained*, Little, Brown & Co., Boston.
- DENNETT, D.C. (1995). *Darwin's dangerous idea*, Simon & Schuster, New York.