

— **Consciousness, freedom and control. Interview with Daniel Dennett**

Coscienza, libertà e controllo. Intervista a Daniel Dennett

di Rosa Spagnolo, Daniel Dennett

Would you explain what consciousness is for – assuming that consciousness wouldn't have evolved unless it was *for something* –?

Actually, consciousness might not itself be *for* anything; it might be a byproduct of something else that evolved as an adaptation. In fact, on my theory, the free-wheeling, free-associating, out-of-control stream of human consciousness is the price we pay for having so many more degrees of freedom than any other organism. Because we can think about anything, we have to learn how to control our own thinking, and this disciplines our minds.

One of the most important questions raised by scientists, psychologists and philosophers of all times (including you)¹ is whether free will is an illusion. What is your view on this?

¹ D.C. Dennett, *Some observations on the psychology of thinking about free will*, in J. Baer, J.C. Kaufman, R.F. Baumeister (Eds.), *Are we free? Psychology and free will*, Oxford University Press, pp. 248 ff.

The only sense in which free will is an illusion is the sense in which color is an illusion. Atoms aren't colored, but when multi-cellular organisms with color vision look at large collections of atoms they see them as colored. It's a very useful illusion, since the color-coding provided by evolution is usually informative about things that matter to us. Similarly, evolution has provided us with a perspective in which choices can be made, after weighing the alternatives. This is also extremely adaptive, allowing us to duck when stones are thrown at us but also to decide *not* to duck, when getting hit by the stone is better – for one reason or another – than avoiding it.

Is autonomy an illusion too? What difference could you outline between autonomy and free will?

Autonomy is self-control, as contrasted with being in the control of another agent, or out of control. There are borderline cases, but in general the distinction is quite sharp. We can be fooled into thinking that we have autonomy when in fact we are being manipulated, but this is a special case. Free will is just the autonomy of a human being who can imagine the future, and plan, and take responsibility.

There is an intense neuroscientific debate around the decision making process: the focus is, in particular, on its conscious versus unconscious influence. What side of this debate are you on?

Of course, there are unconscious influences on decision making, but also conscious influences. We are capable of preparing ourselves to fend off the sorts of covert manipulations people try to use. Of course, as soon as you notice them, you can disarm them. It's an ongoing arms race.

Do you think people can choose how to behave? More specifically, would you tell us more about the "degrees of freedom"²?

Degrees of freedom is a non-controversial term in engineering, and I think it fits the free will sense of freedom very well. If your hands are tied, then all the degrees of freedom in your arms and hands are clamped. If your legs are hobbled, then you can't run, jump, walk climb... But you still have your voice. If they muffle your voice you can think! And there are still millions of degrees of freedom in your mind, but of course we prefer to be unrestrained so that the plans and intentions we frame in our minds can be executed by us at the appropriate time.

In your *From Bacteria to Bach and Back*, you state that "human consciousness is unlike all other varieties of animal consciousness in that it is a product in large part of

² D.C. Dennett, *Consciousness, the brain, and degrees of freedom*, speech held within the Conference Moral Psychology: From Neurons to Norms, Beirut, 24 May 2018

cultural evolution, which installs a bounty of words and many other thinking tools in our brains, creating thereby a cognitive architecture unlike the '*bottom-up*' minds of animals. By supplying our minds with systems of representations, this architecture furnishes each of us with a perspective – a user-illusion – from which we have a limited, biased access to the workings of our brains"³.

Could you tell us more about the concept of "user illusion"?

In much the way computer engineers have designed the user-illusion of a smartphone so that you, the user, don't have to know anything about the incredibly complex inner workings of the device, evolution has designed the user-illusion of our bodies and the world they inhabit, "labeling" everything important with color or sound or "feel" so that our brains can manage to control us without having to know much of anything about how the brain works.

Aggressivity and impulse control: what is the relationship between the two? In your opinion, what are the possible determinants (environmental, genetic, and so on) of aggressive behavior? What do the individual differences in impulse control depend on?

Children are not born with full impulsive control, and some have a deficiency that can become a real problem as they grow up unless steps are taken to help them develop it. Fortunately, there are non-invasive steps that can be taken. Adult levels of self-control are the key requirements of free will. Pure impulsiveness is not free will; it is acting out of control.

What do you think could be the most important links between neuroscientific achievements and criminal law?

There are many, but they are not obvious. As we learn more, we will no doubt learn of categories of human beings who are less self-controlled, less reasonable, than we had thought, and we will have to treat them rather like the way we treat children who misbehave badly. We will have to provide guardians, at least, to keep them out of trouble.

Given the limits of human consciousness, to what extent are people responsible for their own acts? Should we shift our perspective from the idea of punishment to a system of crime prevention?

Definitely not!

Most people are fully competent to take control of their own lives, and they should be allowed the political freedom to move about, make promises, sign contracts, etc., with the understanding that the price they must be willing to pay for this glorious freedom is eligibility for punishment if they break the laws.

³ D.C. Dennett, *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds*, W.W. Norton & Co Inc, 2017, p. 370.

Most people find this an attractive offer, an offer they can't refuse. The loss of freedom and autonomy that must accompany any guardianship arrangement is a great loss. To take a simple example, if I were caught speeding in my car, and offered the choice between punishment (a large fine) and having my driving license taken away permanently, I would certainly choose the punishment.