

Chapter One: Prelude: How Are Hallucinations Possible?

Chapter one of *Consciousness Explained* is obviously just a prelude of things to come, but Dennett does set the stage by introducing ideas that will develop as the book progresses. Here are some that struck me as important.

The first emerges in the example of the psychoanalytic party game, and in a sense it is the heart of the book, a mini-version of the full theory. Here an entire narrative (a dream) is generated not by a single person or group with full authorial intent, but by a nearly mindless process with no conscious direction.

It goes like this: the “dupe” is told that after he leaves the room, one guest will relay a dream to the others. When the dupe returns, he must ask a series of yes or no questions about the dream to each of the guests in turn and use the answers to guess whose dream it was. But when he leaves, the host tells the assembled room the real rules of the game—no one is going to describe their dream. Their yes or no answers will be conditioned as follows:

. . . if the last letter of the last word of the question is in the first half of the alphabet, the question is to be answered in the affirmative, and all other questions are to be answered in the negative, with one proviso: a non-contradiction override rule to the effect that later questions are not to be given answers that contradict earlier answers. (p. 11)

This algorithm will generate a dream out of nothing.

We’re lead to consider this game from a traditional starting point: Descartes’s muse that, in fact, we could be living a dream manipulated by a malicious demon. Of course, when we have a normal dream, we are both the dreamer and the demon, participant and (somehow) author alike. How could this happen?

”The more or less standard answer of the Freudian has been the extravagant hypothesis of an internal dream playwright composing therapeutic dream-plays for the benefit of the ego and cunningly sneaking them past an internal censor by disguising their true meaning.” (p. 14).

This Freudian playwright is a proposed “homunculi”: an intelligent agent of the larger mind, charged with a task to perform. Positing a specific bit of mental engineering and an interior entity poised to instantiate it is permissible in a theory, but “whenever homunculi are rung in to help, they had better be relatively stupid functionaries.” (p.14). This is because unless they are truly stupid, we really have postponed explanation by moving our target inside the homunculi. No, authorship of a normal dream must be explained in a way that does away with the author, or we have no explanation. The psychoanalytic party game is one way to do it.

The game is of a series of Dennettian thought experiments in which near-mindless algorithms suffice to produce the appearance of conscious design where there is none. The role of the audience is easily one performed by a machine that merely looks at the last letter of each question. The questioner--now there’s an “un-exorcised homunculi”. But the questioner and audience roles are parallel to actual models of perception as involving “generate and test” cycles, in which something like homunculi are employed.

These mental subsystems are there to “assuage epistemic hunger----to satisfy ‘curiosity’ in all its forms. If the ‘victim’ is passive or incurious about topic x, if the victim doesn’t seek answers to any questions about topic x, then no material about topic x needs to be prepared.” (p.16). Here the term “victim” refers to the questioner, who in the party game is the butt of the whole joke. This passage also contains hints of ideas that will be developed later. “Material about topic X” sounds like one of his circulating “multiple drafts”. And this notion of perception only needed to “assuage epistemic hunger” is used later to dispense with qualia and “filling in”.

That the book begins with Descartes is of course important, given his influence on how discussions of consciousness are often framed in Western intellectual history. The Cartesian way of talking, and the habits of thought engendered by that way of talking, is the primary thing Dennett wishes to change.

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