

What is it to be rational?

One answer to this question is that to be rational is to be moved by consciously appreciated reasons, instead of by something else in the place of such reasons. In other words, our rationality is imperfect because or insofar as we are susceptible "to being moved in the space of reasons by something other than consciously appreciated reasons" (Daniel C. Dennett).

But, as Dennett, who gives this answer, goes on to argue, we should avoid the absolutism that sees only the two possibilities: either we are perfectly rational or we are not rational at all. This absolutism fosters the irrational fear that science may eventually show us that our rationality is only an illusion, however benign this illusion may be. And this fear, in turn, lends a spurious attractiveness to any doctrine that promises to keep science at bay by mythologizing the self and keeping our minds sacrosanct and mysterious.

As for how we manage to attain to rational, moral agency, having begun with the amoral unfreedom of an infant, Dennett invokes "the Darwinian themes of luck, environmental scaffolding, and gradualism." "A proper human self," he argues, "is the largely unwitting creation of an interpersonal design process in which we encourage small children to become communicators and in particular to join our practice of asking for and giving reasons, and then reasoning about what to do and why." Thus "[t]he first threshold on the path to personhood" is "simply whether or not one's caregivers succeed in kindling a communicator. Those whose fires of reason just won't light for one reason or another are consigned to a lower status, uncontroversially. It's not their fault, it's just their bad luck."

Above this first threshold, however, people show a wide diversity of further talents, "for thinking and talking, and for self-control." Some of this difference is genetic, some congenital; but some of it has no cause at all, being the result of chance. But none of this difference in one's individual legacy is under one's control. Nor is it in any way one's own doing that one is "born into a specific milieu, rich or poor, pampered or abused, given a head start or held back at the starting line." But striking as such differences may be, many of them are in any event of negligible importance to making it over the

second threshold, "the threshold of moral responsibility," by contrast with, e.g., "artistic genius." "Not everybody can be a Shakespeare or a Bach, but almost everybody can learn to read and write well enough to become an informed citizen," i.e., to be held responsible for the actions one takes under the influence of one's fellow-speakers.

Dennett goes on to argue, as it seems to me rightly, that "[s]cientific knowledge is the royal road—the only road—to evitability," i.e., to knowing "which interventions are apt to counteract which shortcomings" in an individual's making it over these two thresholds. His clear implication is that we have every reason to make any intervention that science shows to be indicated, asking rhetorically, "Why should it be important that you do all your self-improvement the old-fashioned way?" and calling us to acknowledge that "the environment we live in has been being updated ever since the dawn of civilization, elaborately prepared, made easy for us, with multiple signposts and alerts along the way, to ease the burdens on us imperfect decisionmakers" and humbly confessing that "[w]e lean on the prostheses that *we* find valuable—that's the beauty of civilized life—even if we tend to begrudge those that others need."

As I try to appropriate Dennett's argument, three thoughts keeping coming to mind.

First, his answer to the original question is closely convergent with mine, according to which to be rational is to make or imply claims to validity and then to validate them, either immediately or mediately, i.e., critically.

Second, his account of how we become rational, morally responsible agents is very much like Hartshorne's in completely undercutting the claims of anti-abortionists that we are human beings from the moment of conception on. On the contrary, Dennett shows, we each become "a proper human self" only as a creature of the "interpersonal design process" by which our caregivers encourage us to become communicators and to join in their practice of asking for and giving reasons and then reasoning about what to do and why.

Third, Dennett directly addresses the whole issue of the relation between the distinctively human and the natural in general, between the level of existence and the level of action, between the level of faith and the level of good works, and so on. Without in any way denying or even questioning that moral agency and responsibility are real and that human actions are indeed subject to value judgments, he rightly insists that the distinctively human is naturally conditioned and so can and should be demythologized.

All quotations are from Daniel C. Dennett, "On Failures of Freedom & the Fear of Science," *Dædalus*, 132, 1 (Winter 2002): 126-130.

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