

# 5 Consciousness

By the mid-1960s Dennett saw that exciting times were ahead for anyone interested in knowing how the brain does the mind's work. While he recognized that developments in neuroscience and cognitive science held important implications for a number of traditional philosophical problems, he had to argue vigorously for the legitimacy of a scientifically-informed approach to the philosophy of mind. It is important to recognize that for much of the twentieth century mainstream scientists had deliberately avoided a number of basic problems in the philosophy of mind. In particular, the so-called mind-body problem, which had plagued modern philosophy for centuries was widely ignored by mainstream scientists.

Perhaps the most difficult part of the mind-body problem is the problem of understanding how living physical bodies in the physical world can give rise to consciousness. How can a physical object like a human or animal brain be the conscious subject of experience? How can a brain be a thinker, a deliberator, or a sufferer of pain? With the development of modern neuroscience, we are beginning to get some grasp on the underlying mechanisms that will eventually allow us to answer questions like this. However, even if we knew *everything* about the anatomy and biochemical processes in the brain and central nervous system, we wouldn't necessarily know *anything* about the mind. Connecting what we know about the brain with what we think we know about the mind requires us to move beyond the confines of neuroanatomy and neurophysiology into the somewhat murkier regions

of the philosophy of mind. One of Dennett's great contributions to the study of mental life has been his ability to bring philosophy and science together. His first step was to convince scientists that traditional philosophical problems, like the problem of consciousness are worth investigating. So, for example, even as late as 1987, Dennett teased the scientific community into recognizing that it was possible to talk sensibly about the mind:

Talking about the mind, for many people, is rather like talking about sex: slightly embarrassing, undignified, maybe even disreputable. "Of course it exists," some might say, "but do we have to talk about it?" Yes, we do. Many people would rather talk about the brain (which, after all, *is* the mind) and would like to think that all the wonderful things we need to say about people could be said without lapsing into vulgar, undisciplined *mentalistic* talk. (IS, 1)

Scientists were suspicious of mentalistic talk, in part because it seemed as though acknowledging the existence of mental life led to intractable philosophical problems. From the perspective of modern scientists, philosophers had struggled to settle the mind-body problem for centuries with no real success and little evidence of progress. As a result, until relatively recently, wary scientists were happy to leave the whole embarrassing topic to philosophers. In his important 1978 paper 'Towards a Cognitive Theory of Consciousness,' Dennett noted that cognitive scientists had paid almost no attention to consciousness:

[O]ne finds not so much a lack of interest as a deliberate avoidance of the issue. I think I know why. Consciousness appears to be the last bastion of occult properties, epiphenomena, immeasurable subjective states – in short, the one area of mind best left to the philosophers, who are welcome to it. Let them make fools of themselves trying to corral the quicksilver of "phenomenology" into a respectable theory. (BR, 149)

It is impossible to deny that we are conscious and yet, it seems difficult to imagine the kind of explanation that would allow science to make sense of this very private, and yet undeniably real phenomenon. Consciousness has long been a source of bafflement and wonder for philosophers. Imagine tasting whiskey, smelling cheese, feeling a tickle or a sharp pain in the knee. In each of these cases one

