

In Memoriam: Daniel C. Dennett – How Humor Enlightens the Workings of the Mind

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Few may know that the great philosopher, Daniel Dennett, who passed away this year, penned with a former student and another co-author, a very interesting book on humor, *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reserve Engineer the Mind* (Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, 2011). Dennett, whom I had the honor of seeing regularly on my way up at Miner Hall at Tufts University, agreed to serve as board member of the *Philosophy of Humor Yearbook* and de Gruyter Series in Philosophy of Humor. He was a great supporter of this new field, and I am very grateful to him for that.

Dennett may no be with us, but his theory of humor is. And much about his involvement with humor can make us, humor theorists, proud. First, he recognized the difficulty of the field: Dennett initially refused to address the topic of humor: “Much too hard!” he said. Second, he managed to be surprised by his findings: Once convinced by his former student, he still found the theory counterintuitive, as it prioritizes the first person perspective, that is, laughter at self is primary, at the other, secondary. Third, he shared in the ambitions of all great theorists of humor: the authors boast to solve the problem once and for all and to ground all other explanations of humor (such as those of Hobbes, Kant, Schopenhauer, Bergson, and Freud...). Finally, Dennett shared our hope that by understanding humor, we would understand the human being: he tells us in an

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interview (*The Tufts Daily*, 2011) that humor educated him on the mind, and on the relation of cognition to emotion.

Yet another point is of special interest for me, and for the way I see the significance of the philosophy of humor. Self-referential humor can hardly be studied in scientific studies. For me, this kind of laughter is central, yet left to philosophy to account for. The fact that Dennett recognized self-referential laughter as the essence of laughter, and grounded his theory in cognitive studies' findings, is quite significant. Here is his argument: The answer to why mirth exists is to be found in an evolutionary and cognitive perspective on humor. A computational problem arose following the open-ended thinking developed by our ancestors. Natural selection had to bribe the brain with pleasure in order to motivate it to do a costly job: finding and fixing near-misses and misleaps (mistaken premises, false assumptions, conflicts among them, jumping to conclusions, faulty implications and simple garbage), solving, debugging, and working fast with the goal of maintaining data integrity. This is the reason why we find funny these mistaken premises, false and conflicting assumptions, unwarranted conclusions, faulty implications, etc.

Having explained the origin of humor and its function in this way, the rest of the story is no less interesting: this wired-in source of pleasure is tickled relentlessly by humorists, so that we have become addicted to the "endogenous mind candy" that is humor. That Dennett finds this self-stimulation akin to masturbation adds a humorous fragrance to it all.

In order to reach this conclusion, Dennett and co-authors discard existing models of the brain in favor of a sketch of how the brain indeed works. By under-

standing mirth they claim to have learned about the mind: the costly job of cleaning up had to be rewarded as everything else in the brain.

An in-depth engagement with the theory is found elsewhere (Amir, 2025c), and my comments as to how it may help us understand why self-referential laughter is prioritized by laughing philosophers from Democritus to Santayana are addressed there (Amir, 2025a) as well as elsewhere (Amir, 2015b): philosophers are considered keen on rectifying errors, which would make self-referential laughter more desirable among them, if not actually predominant.

To honor Daniel Dennett's memory, we should let him have the final word:

What I think is most interesting about the whole project is that it shows much more vividly and persuasively than I had ever thought possible the role of emotion in cognition. It's helped to turn me quite around on some issues there. People in cognitive science have tended to view... emotion as a sort of add-on, and in fact that is just wrong. Emotion is not just central to cognition; it is the control system of cognition. What you think about next is determined by emotional state. (Tufts Daily, 2011)

References

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