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# How to Live a Happy Life, From a Leading Atheist

By David Marchese
Photograph by Mamadi Doumbouya

For more than 50 years, Daniel C. Dennett has been right in the thick of some of humankind's most meaningful arguments: the nature and function of consciousness and religion, the development and dangers of artificial intelligence and the relationship between science and philosophy, to name a few. For Dennett, an *éminence grise* of American philosophy who is nonetheless perhaps best known as one of the "four horsemen" of modern atheism alongside Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, there are no metaphysical mysteries at the heart of human existence, no magic nor God that makes us who we are. Instead, it's science and Darwinian evolution all the way down. In his new memoir, "I've Been Thinking," Dennett, a professor emeritus at Tufts University and author of multiple books for popular audiences, traces the development of his worldview, which he is keen to point out is no less full of awe or gratitude than that of those more inclined to the supernatural. "I want people to see what a meaningful, happy life I've had with these beliefs," says Dennett, who is 81. "I don't need mystery."

**Right now it seems as if truth is in shambles, politics has become religion and the planet is screwed. What's the most valuable contribution philosophers could be making given the state of the world?** Well, let's look at epistemology, the theory of knowledge. Eric Horvitz, the chief scientist at Microsoft, has talked about a "post-epistemic" world.[1] That phrase, the mere fact that he could utter it, is extremely frightening. The presence of agreed-upon landmarks and sources of common knowledge — this is something we've taken for granted for a long time and can no longer take for granted. We have to work to try to restore it.

**How?** By highlighting the conditions under which knowledge is possible. This will look off track for a moment, but we'll come around: Andrew Wiles proved Fermat's last theorem.[2] It was one of the great triumphs of mathematics in my lifetime. Why do we know that he did it? Don't ask me to explain complex mathematics. It's beyond me. What convinces me that he proved it is that the community of mathematicians of which he's a part put it under scrutiny and said, "Yep, he's got it." That model of constructive and competitive interaction is the key to knowledge. I think we know that the most reliable path to truth is through communication of like-minded and disparate thinkers who devote serious time to trying to get the truth — and there's no algorithm for that.


Daniel C. Dennett giving a lecture in Poland in 2017. Beata Zawrzel/NurPhoto, via Getty Images

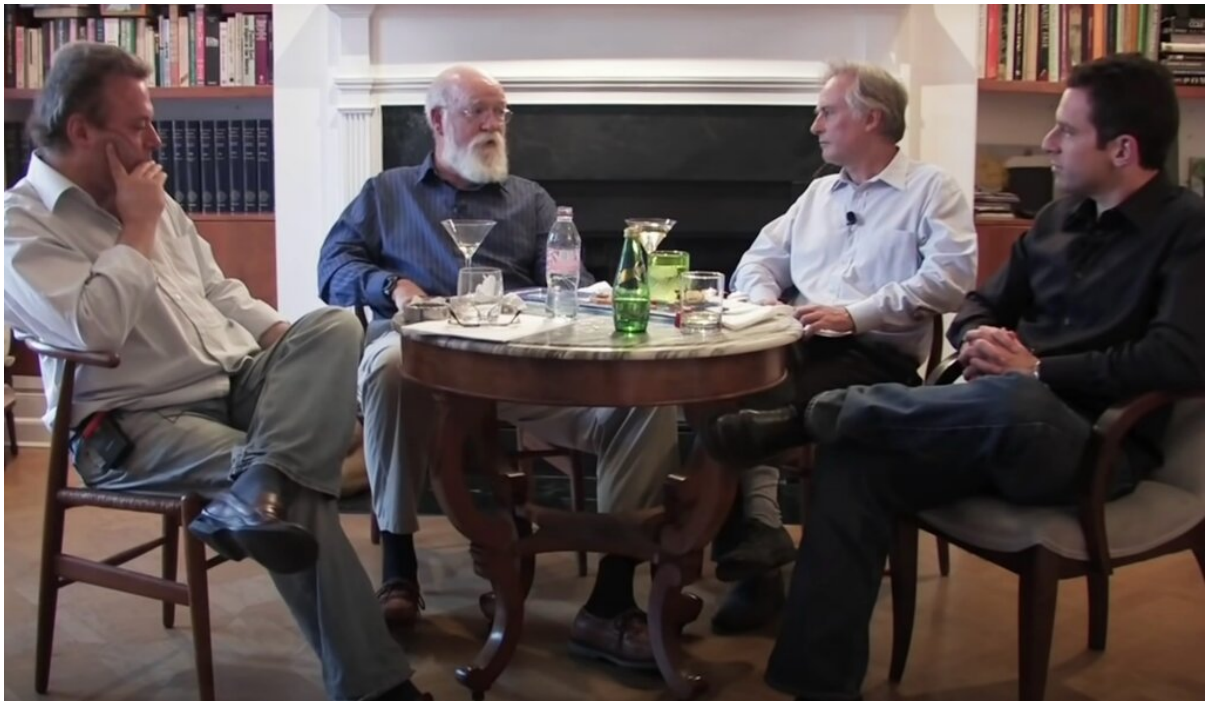
**There's a section in your book "Breaking the Spell" where you lament the postmodern idea that truth is relative.[3] How do we decide which truths we should treat as objective and which we treat as subjective? I'm thinking of an area like personal identity, for example, where we hear phrases like, "This is my truth."** The idea of "my truth" is second-rate. The people who think that because this is their opinion, somehow it's aggressive for others to criticize or reject them — that's a self-defeating and pernicious attitude. The recommended response is: "We'd like to bring you into the conversation, but if you're unable to consider arguments for and against your position, then we'll consider you on the sidelines. You're a spectator, not a participant." You don't get to play the faith card. That's not how rational inquiry goes.

**This is skipping around a little, but in the memoir you refer to the fervor around ChatGPT as a "bubble." Why is it a bubble?** There's an idea here that I want to talk about: In the piece that I wrote for The Atlantic on counterfeit people,[4] I mentioned that the great danger of GPT-3 and ChatGPTs and so forth is that they can reproduce. They're memes. You don't have to be alive to evolve. Viruses aren't alive; boy, do they evolve. Things evolve because they can, and cultural evolution — memetic evolution — is a potent phenomenon. We don't want to have censorship, but we want to have something like quarantine to prevent the spread of cultural variants that could destroy culture, destroy democracy. The economist Paul Seabright writes[5] movingly about trust, and trust is a social phenomenon. Society depends on trust. Trust is now seriously endangered by the replicative power of A.I. and phony interactions. This is a grave danger. There's a natural human tendency to think, If I can do it, I will do it, and not worry about whether I ought to. The A.I. community has altogether too many people who just see the potentiality and aren't willing to think about risks and responsibility. I would like to throw a pail of cold water on their heads and say, "Wait a minute, it's not cool to make easily copied devices that will manipulate people in ways that will destroy their trust."

**You've written about the idea that comprehension can come out of competence.[6] Does that imply that there's nothing stopping A.I., which we currently think of as more capable of competence rather than true comprehension, from becoming sentient?** Yes, strong A.I. is possible in principle. There's no magic. Many years ago, Giulio Giorello, wonderful philosopher of science and journalist in Milan, interviewed me, and the headline in the Corriere della Sera the next day was, "Sì, abbiamo un'anima. Ma è fatta di tanti piccoli robot": "Yes, we have a soul, but it's made of lots of tiny robots."

**What did you mean by "tiny robots"?** Your brain, your whole body, is made of cells. Each cell is a living agent of its own. It has a sort of agenda: It's trying to stay alive. It's got to keep itself a supply of energy to keep going. It's got a metabolism. It's the descendant of a long ancestry of free-floating, living cells that had to fend for themselves, and they've all joined forces to make a multicellular body. Those are little robots. If you look inside them, how do they move? How do neurons reach out and grab other neurons and send signals to them? They've got trillions of motor proteins, and motor proteins are not alive. They're macromolecules. They march along on these little highways on the brain, carrying things around. They're porters. They carry the necessary materials to keep the cell going and to repair and to extend its dendrites, for instance. Motor proteins aren't alive. Ribosomes aren't alive. Life couldn't exist without these little molecular machines — by the trillions — that are working in your body right now. Human life and human consciousness are made

possible by these incredibly brilliant consortia of little robots.



The “four horsemen” of modern atheism in 2007: Christopher Hitchens, Dennett, Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris. Screen grab from YouTube

**We have a soul, but it’s made of tiny robots. There is no God. These are ideas of yours that I think a lot of people can rationally understand, but the gap between that rational understanding and their feelings involves too much ambivalence or ambiguity for them to accept. What is it about you that you can arrive at those conclusions and not feel adrift, while other people find those ideas too destabilizing to seriously entertain?** Some people don’t want magic tricks explained to them. I’m not that person. When I see a magic trick, I want to see how it’s done. People want free will or consciousness, life itself, to be real magic. What I want to show people is, look, the magic of life as evolved, the magic of brains as evolving in between our own ears, that’s thrilling! It’s affirming. You don’t need miracles. You just need to understand the world the way it really is, and it’s unbelievably wonderful. We’re so lucky to be alive! The anxiety that people feel about giving up the traditional magical options, I take that very seriously. I can feel that anxiety. But the more I understood about the things I didn’t understand, the more the anxiety ebbed. The more the joy, the wondrousness came back. At the end of “Darwin’s Dangerous Idea,” I have my little hymn to life and the universe.[7] That’s my God — more wonderful than anything I could imagine in detail, but not magical.

**Is it right that your sister is a minister?** My older sister is the white sheep of the family. [Laughs.] She went to seminary and was ordained late in her life. She's still alive. She was raised in the Congregational Church, which became part of what's now the United Church of Christ, which is religion lite. If all religion were like that, all religion would be fantastic.

**So how do you understand religious belief?** No problem at all. More people believe in belief in God than believe in God.[8] We should recognize it and recognize that people who believe in belief in God are sometimes very reluctant to consider that they might be wrong. What if I'm wrong? That's a question I ask myself a lot. These people do not want to ask that question, and I understand why. They're afraid of what they might discover. I want to give them an example of somebody who asks the question and is not struck down by lightning. I'm often quoted as saying, "There's no polite way of telling people they've devoted their life to an illusion." Actually, what I said was, "There's no polite way of asking people to consider whether they've devoted their life to an illusion, but sometimes you have to ask it."

**There was something in your memoir that was conspicuous to me: You wrote about the late 1960s, when your pregnant wife had a bowel obstruction.** Yeah, we lost the baby.

**You describe it as "the saddest, loneliest, most terrifying" time of your life.** Yes.

**That occupies one paragraph of your memoir.** Yes.

**What is it indicative of about you — or your book — that a situation you described that way takes up such a small space in the recounting of your life?** Look at the title of the book: "I've Been Thinking." There are hundreds of pages of stories that I cut at various points from drafts because they were about my emotional life, my trials and so forth. This isn't a tell-all book. I don't talk about unrequited love, failed teenage crushes. There are mistakes I made or almost made that I don't tell about. That's just not what the book's about.

**But that brevity — I thought, is that showing something about you?** I'm interested that you had that reaction. I bet you won't be alone in that. We have two adopted children. I don't talk about them much, but they are joys of our life. I'll tell you a little story: Joe Weizenbaum[9] was very avuncular with me when we met in 1973. I was teaching at Harvard, and he was writing "Computer Power and Human Reason." He was sort of my Dutch uncle for a while, giving me advice. And one day I said to him: "You know, Joe, I have a

strange worry. Our children are growing up in this house full of books and music and love. They're having an ideal childhood in many ways, at least by my lights, and I'm afraid that when they get to be adults they'll be soft as grapes. I don't want to put troubles in their way, yet it worries me that I'm not giving them any troubles." He said: "Don't worry, Dan. They'll make their own troubles." And they did, both of them. I don't talk about those. They've overcome the obstacles they created for themselves, and I don't go into that either. But, boy, I spent as much time on that as I spent on my career as a philosopher.

Dennett with his wife, Susan, and their children in 1975. From Daniel C. Dennett

**The title of the book is "I've Been Thinking," but don't your feelings affect your thinking and the philosophical ideas you pursue?** Oh, absolutely! It's all — to use an old-fashioned term — driven by passion. The emotions rule. When I wrote the book with Matthew Hurley on humor,[10] one of the great insights that Matthew gave me was that all control in human minds is via emotion. This is an important idea. Your laptop has an operating system. It's dictatorial in how it runs things. It's the traffic cop. In your brain, there's no operating system in that sense — it's all the turmoil of emotions. Happily, we have learned how to harness those emotions. That is to say, the emotions have learned how to harness one another. [Laughs.] But that "self" is at every level and all times driven by what we might call emotions and microemotions. Let's

see how I can put it: When you are choosing the words that come out of your mouth, slight subliminal differences in the emotional tone of one word over another, that's what's going to decide which word you use. If you're in a pissy mood, you use one word. And if you're in a happy mood, you use a different word. All of that is controlled by emotions.

**Is it possible to be objective about the ways in which our emotions drive us?** Very good question. There's a conflict between objectivity and subjectivity here. You can't objectively, calmly study in yourself the heights of sexual passion. If you try, you fail. Don't try. You can think about it before or after. You can think about it in others. You can do heterophenomenology, but you can't coldly study your own passions, because you need other passions to be in charge when you're doing that. Only one set of agents can be in the driver's seat at a time. A self is an individually evolved — I use the word "evolved" on purpose — variety of natural selection that trains up the emotional drivers in each of us and achieves a level of balance. It's an entente. It's a ruse of sorts that holds until it doesn't. It's a story we tell ourselves, but it's a story guided by facts. It's not just made up. We should agree with Richard Rorty and Jacques Derrida, because the ideal of objective truth in the sense of what Tom Nagel speaks about in "The View From Nowhere"[11] — that's a sort of ideal that is not achievable in any meaningful way. Absolute truth, off the table. But practical truth? That's real, and that's what we're striving for. Rorty was the hero of a lot of postmodernists, and he seemed to be saying that there was no notion of truth, that it was all just conversation. I always resisted: No, no, there's still a good notion of truth. It's the notion of truth that you use when you say, "Is this a good map of the roads in the state?" We can get quite objective about that. [Laughs.] Rorty called that the vegetarian concept of truth.[12] OK, let's be vegetarians!

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity from two conversations.