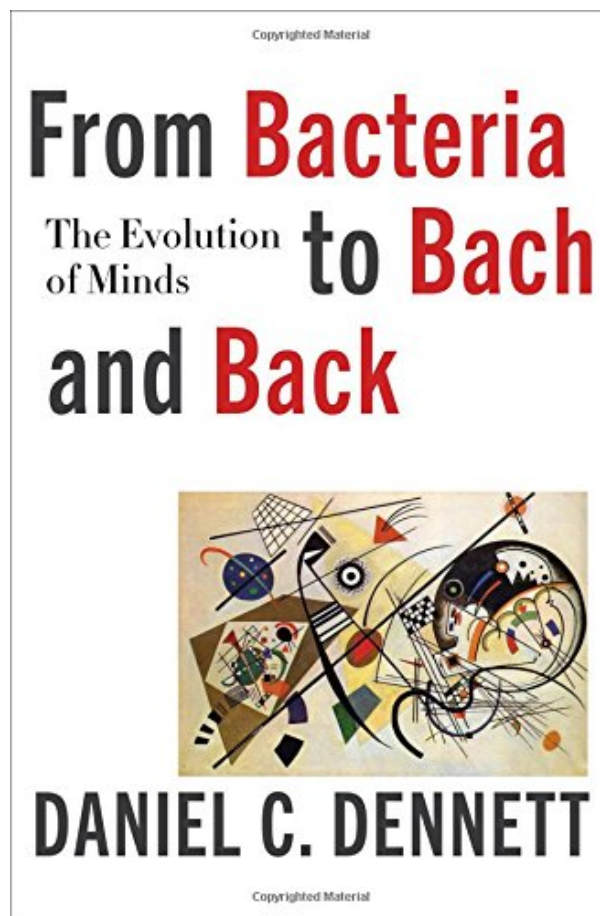


**FROM BACTERIA TO BACH AND BACK:
THE EVOLUTION OF MINDS BY DANIEL C.
DENNETT**



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Review

“Illuminating and insightful. . . . [Dennett] makes a convincing case, based on a rapidly growing body of experimental evidence, that a materialist theory of mind is within reach. . . . His ideas demand serious consideration.” (Publishers' Weekly)

About the Author

Daniel C. Dennett is University Professor and Austin B. Fletcher Professor of Philosophy at Tufts University and the author of numerous books including *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking*, *Breaking the Spell*, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, and *Consciousness Explained*.

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One of America's foremost philosophers offers a major new account of the origins of the conscious mind.

How did we come to have minds?

For centuries, this question has intrigued psychologists, physicists, poets, and philosophers, who have wondered how the human mind developed its unrivaled ability to create, imagine, and explain. Disciples of Darwin have long aspired to explain how consciousness, language, and culture could have appeared through natural selection, blazing promising trails that tend, however, to end in confusion and controversy. Even though our understanding of the inner workings of proteins, neurons, and DNA is deeper than ever before, the matter of how our minds came to be has largely remained a mystery.

That is now changing, says Daniel C. Dennett. In *From Bacteria to Bach and Back*, his most comprehensive exploration of evolutionary thinking yet, he builds on ideas from computer science and biology to show how a comprehending mind could in fact have arisen from a mindless process of natural selection. Part philosophical whodunit, part bold scientific conjecture, this landmark work enlarges themes that have sustained Dennett's legendary career at the forefront of philosophical thought.

In his inimitable style?laced with wit and arresting thought experiments?Dennett explains that a crucial shift occurred when humans developed the ability to share memes, or ways of doing things not based in genetic instinct. Language, itself composed of memes, turbocharged this interplay. Competition among memes?a form of natural selection?produced thinking tools so well-designed that they gave us the power to design our own memes. The result, a mind that not only perceives and controls but can create and comprehend, was thus largely shaped by the process of cultural evolution.

An agenda-setting book for a new generation of philosophers, scientists, and thinkers, *From Bacteria to Bach and Back* will delight and entertain anyone eager to make sense of how the mind works and how it came about.

4 color, 18 black-and-white illustrations

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Most helpful customer reviews

20 of 20 people found the following review helpful.

Deep, meaty and clever, but digressive and slow-going

By Ashutosh S. Jogalekar

This book is typical of Daniel Dennett's other offerings. It's extremely meaty, rich in metaphor and analogies, often deep and remarkably thought-provoking, linguistically clever, wide ranging to the point of being distractingly digressive and covers a remarkable swathe of intellectual ground, from computers to neurobiology, from word acquisition to elevator design, from computer bugs to biological viruses, from Charles Darwin to Alan Turing.

That being said, it's hard to say what this book is really about since it's about so many different things. As another reviewer pointed out, Dennett's digressions can sometimes be distracting and it is difficult to see the central point in his argument. The book also doesn't seem to present a novel hypothesis per se. Its ostensible purpose is to describe the evolution of human minds and thinking and what makes them special. It succeeds in this endeavor to a large extent, but still doesn't end up really explaining key concepts like consciousness (which Dennett thinks is an illusion). The main device that Dennett uses for unraveling intelligence and minds is the concept of memes which was introduced by Richard Dawkins. According to Dennett, the co-evolution of genes and culture through memes is what makes human minds special. Again, gene-culture co-evolution is not a new concept, but Dennett explores it with verve and insight.

I think the main function of this book is to serve as a springboard for exploring some very clever analogies between software and biology and for appreciating the naturalistic evolution of human language and thinking. There are gems scattered throughout the text: for instance, the concept of "competence without comprehension" which is a version of Dawkins's "blind watchmaker" analogy, and the very revealing insight that simple things like nail cutters might be impossible to imagine arising through natural selection while complicated things like human minds can well be imagined evolving this way. There are also excellent discussions on how children acquire words and how these words then interact with genetics and culture to produce very human features of the brain like foresight, introspection and planning for the future. Some of this material constitutes an argument against intelligent design. The analogies are elegant and often clever and Dennett's play on words can be very subtle; for this reason several paragraphs may have to be read a few times to really grasp their essence. In this sense the book has to be savored and resampled like fine wine.

In general then, I enjoyed the book but found it too digressive and slow-going in parts. On several occasions I found Dennett slipping into academic language, with the academic references and jargon to boot. Reading this volume requires patience and careful study, and this patience will often be rewarded. But it's not what you would call an introductory or popular treatment: if you are not familiar with standard popular works on evolution, language and psychology by writers like Richard Dawkins, Steven Pinker, Matt Ridley or Daniel Kahneman it would likely be pretty hard going. But as a sampling of scattered gems which reveal themselves through rumination and constant reflection, it's hard to find a writer as clever and insightful as Daniel Dennett.

6 of 10 people found the following review helpful.

wanders aimlessly

By Benjamin Crowell

I previously read Dennett's *Elbow room: the varieties of free will worth wanting*, and thought it did a reasonable job of demystifying the topic. This book, however, was a disappointment. Dennett wanders aimlessly from topic to topic. I honestly can't tell you what the book was supposed to be about. If it was supposed to be about the evolution of the human mind, then I don't understand why this is a topic that philosophy has anything useful to say about. It would have been more interesting to read a book by a scientist, maybe someone who studies animal behavior.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

Somewhat of a Synthesis Between Darwin's *Dangerous Idea* and *Consciousness Explained*

By Mike Morg

Dennett's books are lengthy because he takes any route possible prod the reader for his main points, thesis per se. This book was less focused than say *Consciousness Explained*, or *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, but more focused than *Intuition Pumps* (which was more a compilation of general thinking concepts, but that's the point). It took upon the more general task of explaining the evolution of consciousness, and did some justice in explaining how we can be "conscious" human beings, vastly more capable of higher thought than any other animal in the biosphere, with just the mindless neuronc machinery installed in our brain (and body). This is called, and he stresses plus explains it: competence without comprehension. Sort of like the Dawkinian 'selfish gene' point of view whereas from the bottom up genes are programmed to propagate the reproduction of their own lineage. Dennett imposes this naturalistic evolutionary approach on organisms like ants, on language, and on memes. Whereas on *Consciousness Explained* you'd get a much more detailed and trenchant discussion consciousness, and on *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* you'd get a more elaborate portrait of evolution, here you get a more generalized synthesis of both (with updates). What's good about Dennett is that despite the fact he takes you through many paths to get to his point, he makes you aware that he's doing so. If you have read Dennett's books before, then, at least from experience, his lengthy discussion on language and memes are novel to me and shine the brightest here. The information may be superfluous at times - being handed it is like when you're given extra food at a barbecue despite being full. You feel bloated after, but it was good food. But despite being rigorous at times, there's a sense of personality and he damn well knows what he's talking about.

See all 6 customer reviews...

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