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Clearing the Head

Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking

By Daniel Dennett

(Allen Lane/The Penguin Press 496pp £20)

According to modern science, we live in a material world. Everything that happens depends on the play of fundamental particles moving in strict accord with the laws of physics. Nothing is exempt. Stars, rainbows, plant growth, animal behaviour and the antics of our own exquisite selves are all essentially physical processes. If it doesn't seem like that to us at first sight, this is only because of the unrevealing ways in which our material brains respond to the material world.

Many people react to the materialist news with dismay. If materialism were true, they feel, then life wouldn't be worth living. What would be the point of anything, if there were nothing more to our choices and ambitions than electrical messages shuttling around in our brain? And dismay leads to rejection. A natural response to the news is to shoot the messenger. If science tells us that we are nothing more than complex machines made of squishy components, then so much the worse for science. We would do better to turn away from science and embrace alternative systems of belief that will restore our self-respect.

However, this anxious distrust is not the only possible reaction to the scientific message, nor in the end the most positive one. After all, it is unlikely that modern science has made a mistake, and wishful thinking isn't going to make science go away. Rather than stick our heads in the sand, we might instead note that even if the world is indeed entirely material, it certainly contains very good imitations of conscious human beings with heartfelt ambitions, values and concern for their fellows.

Perhaps that is all we need. A purely materialist universe might not be quite what we would have chosen, but it may still leave room for all the important things in life. By thinking harder about the essence of humanity, we may be able to show how it can be accommodated in a material world after all. Maybe there are ways of understanding purpose and value that make them consistent with materialism. Then we could have the cake of scientific knowledge without having to forgo our sense of human purpose.

The philosopher Daniel Dennett has devoted his working life to just this project. From his earliest academic publications onwards, he has sought out ways of showing how materialism leaves room for the higher things in life. A stream of works now stretching over nearly half a century has tackled consciousness, meaning, intelligence, free will and even humour. Just try thinking about these things in my way, Dennett urges, and you will see that there is nothing in the materialist worldview to threaten them.

While the themes of Dennett's work have remained constant, the register has shifted. His first book, *Content and Consciousness*, was published by Routledge in 1969 as one of the red-bound volumes in their austere International Library of Philosophy and Scientific Method. Over the next couple of decades Dennett built a reputation as a leading academic philosopher who drew freely on concepts of artificial intelligence and neuroscience to illuminate the workings of the human mind. But at the same time he discovered a talent for reaching a wider audience. His forceful style and gift for graphic examples made him a natural communicator, and one of the pieces in his 1978 collection *Brainstorms* was a science-fiction parable that must be the only philosophy article ever to have been made into a film (*Victim of the Brain*, 1988). By 1991 he had broken into the trade press with *Consciousness Explained*, and since then a further series of books, including *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* on the powers of natural selection and *Breaking the Spell* on the seductions of religion, has elevated him into the top rank of popular-science writers.

Inevitably this success has occasioned some carping from his philosophical peers. Some feel that he has sacrificed precision for the common touch. In his defence, Dennett has increasingly voiced his impatience with the clever scholasticism that marks a lot of current academic philosophy. 'If it's not worth doing, it's not worth doing well', he says, and there's no doubt that he is right to aim this barb at much contemporary philosophical work. Still, there are times where one wishes Dennett would go slightly more slowly. Where he used to take a lot of care with the hard bits, he is now more likely to remind us of some slogan from his earlier works.

This latest book manifests both Dennett's strengths and his weaknesses. 'Intuition pump' is a term coined by Dennett for the kind of fictional examples philosophers use to tease principles out from the mess of real life. If all the memories encoded in my brain were replaced with yours, would I become you? If you had never seen colours, would you find out something new when you were shown a red rose? And so on. In Dennett's view, there are good intuition pumps and bad. But the book's primary purpose is not to reflect on intuition pumps as such, but to provide a peg on which to hang a number of familiar themes. (It should be said that, while it is arranged like a new work, by far the greater part of *Intuition Pumps* is cobbled together from old articles and bits of previous books.)

Dennett's non-technical approach works better in some areas than others. He is persuasive about free will and mental representation, and insightful about the need to avoid 'greedy reductionism' and pay due attention to the complexities of nature. However, he is less convincing on other subjects. Consciousness, for example, has always been a bit of a blind spot for Dennett. In the face of the intense philosophical analysis of this topic over the past couple of decades, he has maintained a strange loyalty to the neo-

behaviourism he learned from Gilbert Ryle as a graduate student in Oxford. But the debate has advanced since then. It may involve a lot of tiresome technicalities, but this is a topic where we need to see the trees as well as the wood, and Dennett's focus is ill-suited for this.

Still, the virtues of *Intuition Pumps* outweigh the vices. Over the years Daniel Dennett has done as much as anyone to come to terms with modern materialism. For those new to his work, this book would be an excellent way to gain an overview of his contribution. And for those who have learned from him already, there is much in these pages to entertain.