

Topsight, Bullshit, and Noise:

Dennett's Take on Exaptation, Information Sifting, and Pattern Detection

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A couple of insights from Daniel Dennett's *From Bacteria to Bach and Back* (2017)— allowing us to see the interface between exaptation and topsight. Which is by way of information theory.

First, [exaptation](#), Stephen Jay Gould's term, which is not mentioned here by Dennett, but anyway. How to make a new or alternative or increased use of an organ which originally developed for another purpose but which happens to possess unforeseen or unselected-for side effects, and thereby acquires or develops a new function or use—a wing not made for flying which allows an aspiring bird first to flaunt and flutter and fan, and then to fly:

Evolution is all about turning "bugs" into "features", turning "noise" into "signal" and the fuzzy boundaries between these categories are not optional; the opportunistic open-endedness of natural selection depends on them. This is in fact the key to Darwin's strange inversion of reason: creationists ask, rhetorically, "Where does all the information in the DNA come from?" and Darwin's answer is simple: it come from the gradual, purposeless, nonmiraculous transformation of noise into signal,

over billions of years. Innovations must (happen to) have fitness-enhancing effects from the outset if they are to establish new "encodings," so the ability of something to convey semantic information cannot depend on its prior qualification as a code element. (Dennett, 124)

A clear (illuminating?) example: an eye may originally arise from a heat-sensitive cell which, as it evolves, gradually turns the noise of nonperceived light and color into the signal of perceived light and color, unscrambling the different wavelengths woven into the noise and bringing and image into focus.

The above goes on:

There will be (so far as I can see) [note, *so far as I can SEE*] no privileged metric for saying *how much* semantic information is "carried" in any particular signal—either a genetic signal from one's ancestors or an environmental signal from one's sensory experience. As Shannon recognized, information is always relative to what the receiver already knows [*i.e. relative to previous information*], and although in models we can "clamp" the boundaries of the signal and the receiver, in real life these boundaries with the surrounding context are porous.

And now we transition from information gathering and processing to [TOPSIGHT](#), in an extended cognitive sense—another term or concept that Dennett does not use but which I think benefits from his analysis, which might also benefit from it. Topsight as used and defined in this blog, and understood as competitively superior information gathering, processing and use in a given situation. Especially competitive situations, but then any situation may turn out to be a competitive one after the fact. Topsight provides (or is) superior insight and is (or provides) strategic advantages, a superior cognitive mapping of the situation and the interactants's respective (hypothesized) cognitive maps:

Semantic information is not always valuable to one who carries it. Not only can a person be burdened with useless facts, but often particular items of information are an emotional burden as well—not that evolution cares about your emotional burdens, so long as you make more offspring than the competition. This doesn't cancel the link to utility in the definition of semantic information; it complicates it. (The value of gold coins is not put in doubt by the undeniable fact that pockets full of gold coins may drown a strong swimmer). Still defining semantic information as *design worth getting* seems to fly in the face of the fact that so much of the semantic information that streams into our heads every day is *not* worth getting and is in fact a detestable nuisance, clogging up our control systems and distracting us from the tasks we ought to be engaged in. (127)

Which reminds me that I should be doing something else just now. But this is by the way. The above goes on as follows:

But we can turn this "bug" in our definition into a "feature" by noting that the very existence of information-handling systems depends on the design value of the information that justifies the expense of building them in the first place. (127)

This brings to mind a well-known quandary, that you never know when or whether you are going to need a random factoid or piece of junk you store in the warehouse of just-in-case. Such outcomes are decided in the thick of things, because situations are always partly unexpected and partly multidimensional. A relevant reading on topsight at this point may be pointed out here as an excursus or clarification—in this paper on the multidimensionality of reality in which the interface of dimensions often defines *where the action is*, being as it is closer than any isolated dimensional model to the uniqueness of the situation—its unique complexity—

and the unprecedented interaction of its dimensions (or frames, or Goffmanian channels of information).

Voici the paper:

_____. "The (In)Definition of Reality: Reframing and Contested Topsight." SSRN 13 April 2016.*

<http://ssrn.com/abstract=2763243>

2016

The Dennett passage goes on as follows:

"Once in place, an information-handling system, a pair of eyes or ears, a radio, the Internet) can be exploited—parasitized—by noise of several species: sheer meaningless "random" *white noise* (the raspy "static" that interferes with your transistor radio when the signal is weak), and semantic information that is useless or harmful to the receiver. Spam and phishing e-mails on the Internet are obvious examples, both dust clouds and (deliberately released) squid ink are others." (127)

Here we reach informational trash, or the *fake news* of the corporate media denounced by Donald Trump with accusations they threw back on his head—or, in a more subtly massive way, the organized "fact-checkers" deployed globally by the Poynter Institute with their arful mismanagement of scandals and of whistleblowers' conspiracy scandals, slickly explaining them away *by the book*.

The disinformation game reaches an explicitly global scale when the United Nations, the European Union, the Biden Administration, the Big Pharma, the Big Tech and the WEF unleash a witch hunt against *pandemic negationists, climate change deniers*, and other *dangerous disinformers* who abuse whatever freedom of

expression is available, by using it. Deliberately released Squid Ink, indeed.



Dennett goes on with further insights on the dialectics between information detection, deceptive disinformation spreading, and topsight:

"The malicious items depend for their effect on the trust the receiver invests in the medium. Since Aesop we've known that the boy who cries wolf stops commanding attention and credence after a while. Batesian mimicry (such as a nonpoisonous snake with markings that mimic a poisonous variety) is a similar kind of parasitism, getting a benefit without going to the cost of manufacturing poison, and when the mimics outnumber the genuinely poisonous snakes Aesop's moral takes hold and the deceitful signal loses its potency.

Any information-transmitting medium or channel can set off an arms race of deception and detection, but *within an organism*, the

channels *tend* to be highly reliable. Since all "parties" have a common fate, sinking or swimming together, trust reigns (Sterelny 2003). (For some fascinating exceptions, see Haig 2008 on genomic imprinting)." (127)

Note that, on the political level, ancient nations often stood or fell sharing the common fate of an organism, while more the more elaborate politics of global empires or modern states gives rise to rather more complex interplay of trust, deception and mutual reliance. The skin in the game is not as bare as it used to be, for good and ill alike.

Dennett's final pronouncement on informational topsight-minus-the-name. Note that he is thinking mainly in biological terms, of arms races and struggle for life in ecosystems, but these notions may be usefully applied to informational ecosystems or infosystems in human cultures (since man preys on man in an organized manner, what Hobbes called the state of culture, and Marx the systematic exploitation of men by man—through all available means and media).

"Error is always possible, the result of simple breakdown—wear and tear— of the system, or misapplication of the system to environments it is ill equipped to handle. This is why delusions and illusions are such a rich source of evidence in cognitive neuroscience, providing hints about what is being *relied upon* by the organism in the normal case. It is often noted that the brain's job in perception is to filter out, discard, and ignore all but the noteworthy features of the flux of energy striking one's sensory organs. Keep and refine the ore of (useful) information, and leave all the noise out." (127-28)

Keeping the noise out allows the organism to survive, and allows the awakened citizen to gobble less media-fed bullshit. Here Dennett will sound positively like William Gibson trying to detect the near future or

recognize the emerging patterns of the future which are already at work in the present:

"Any nonrandomness in the flux is a real pattern that is *potentially useful* information for some possible creature or agent to exploit in anticipating the future." (128)

By way of context for this allusion or parallel, here are my papers on some novels by William Gibson:

_____. "Pattern Recognition de William Gibson: El presente presentado con jet-lag." <http://www.researchgate.net/publication/33419644>

_____. "Cyberspace Everting: *Spook Country*, de William Gibson." <https://www.academia.edu/173388/>

_____. "A MacGuffin of Ultimate Scale." <http://vanityfea.blogspot.com/2011/12/macguffin-of-ultimate-scale.html>

—all of them dramatizing and exploring novel ecosystems of information circulation, sifting and management, on the socialite net, on the Internet, or on "The net of telephony, all digitized, and all, she had to suppose, listened to" ("Spook Country" 158).

Let's quote Dennett on net information patterns in lifeworld ecosystems, and on topsight on the net:

"A tiny subset of the real patterns in the world of any agent comprise the agent's *Umwelt*, the set of its affordances. These patterns are the *things* that agent should have in its ontology, the things that should be attended to, tracked, distinguished, studied. The rest of the real patterns in the flux are just noise *as far as that agent is concerned*. From our Olympian standpoint (we are not gods, but we are cognitively head and shoulders above the rest of the creatures), we can often see that there is semantic information in the world that is intensely relevant to the welfare of creatures who are just unequipped to detect it. The information is indeed in the light but not for them." (128)

Which invites an analogy... just as we are gods to the ants and cattle who lack the appropriate patterns of information detection and management (our superior information is just noise for them) *there are Informed Humans and Spooks* for whom we are the Cattle and the Ants—resources to be used and exploited. They bit the Apple of the Tree of Information, aspiring to be like Gods, enjoying the available Topsight. And they trust, even as they watch us grope like moles, that they will escape our detection, forever if possible, or at least keeping several steps ahead of the buzz in the herd.

Such things do happen in the real world, —only it is not real for us.

[The Jackpot](#)

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