

DENNETT'S DESIGN SPACE AS SECULAR FORM OF TRANSCENDENCE

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Thinking about the world always takes place within pre-set boundaries that enable meaning. And it is precisely these limits and what is outside the borders (what is beyond, what is transcendent) that allows meaningful speech and sense of meaning for what is inside borders. While thinking about the limits of meaning and what is outside of it (and that is *something* that establishes meaning), we can think of it in a variety of categories (such as spatial, temporal, physical, moral, logical, social and other...), and we are doing this since we exist as a human being.

1. *Secular surrogates of transcendence*

Terry Eagleton had noticed this in his book *Culture and the death of God*, in which he deals with, what he calls *secular surrogates of transcendence*. He is particularly interested in the state of religion before and after 9/11, and in unsatisfactory surrogates for God and religion in contemporary societies.

So, what he had noticed is that every historical period have had some sort of alternative concept of transcendence as opposed to one that we can locate in religions, or more precisely, in Christianity. And for this reason, Eagleton is leading us in his book through some of great historical periods, questioning its ideas, concepts and models of society, politics, culture, arts and transcendence. "From Enlightenment Reason to modernist art, a whole range of phenomena therefore took on the task of providing surrogate forms of transcendence, plugging the gap where God had once been." (Eagleton 2014, Preface) So in this range of almost four centuries, Eagleton enumerates some surrogates and expose them to critical thinking. Here I will just simply list some of them because there is no time here to present them all in detail. Enlightenment forced Reason to step in God's place and almost all of its

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philosophers “renounced the sovereignty of church and Scripture, but betrayed a naïve trust in the authority of Nature and Reason. They dismantled heaven but looked forward to a perfect human future; spoke up for tolerance but found the sight of a priest hard to stomach; scoffed at miracles but believed in the perfectibility of the human race, and substituted a devotion to humanity for the love of God. They also replaced divine grace with civic virtue.” (Eagleton 2014, 17) The rest of surrogates can be found in culture, arts, politic, sport, individualism where the conscious subject becomes self-creating entity, responsible for its condition. All these surrogates are treating religion as historically outdated social system. Then the transcendence itself become “more horizontal than vertical — more a question of a history which is perpetually in excess of itself, en route to some future pleroma or state of fulfillment, than of a God who lies in the silent spaces beyond his own universe.” (Eagleton 2014, 47) And all these surrogates failed in their tasks. Eagleton is sharing with us several reasons for this to happen. First there is ability of religion to link theoretical and practical sphere of life (on personal and social level), and second, more important, is that “as long as God’s shoes have been filled by Reason, art, culture, Geist, imagination, the nation, humanity, the state, the people, society, morality or some other such specious surrogate, the Supreme Being is not quiet dead.” (Eagleton 2014, 151) So, even though Nietzsche had pronounced the death of God, this *Supreme Being* has survived since he himself put *Übermensch* in God’s place. The *Übermensch* is, like Almighty, a mini-Creator since he rests upon nothing but himself. “Man can displace God only if he is self-creating, hence abolishing his dependency and contingency; yet from him to become self-creating is to perpetuate the deity in a different form.” (Eagleton 2014, 161) The decisive break does not come with Nietzsche after all, concludes Eagleton, because you cant get rid of God only if you also do away with innate meaning. “Abolishing given meanings involves destroying the idea of depth, which in turn means rooting out beings like God who take shelter there.” (Eagleton 2014, 155) This idea of depth in philosophical and theological tradition is presented as the transcendence. And this notion of abolishing innate meaning brings us to today when “as the power of religion beings to fail, its various functions are redistributed like a precious legacy to those aspiring to become its heirs. Scientific rationalism takes over its doctrinal certainties, while radical politics inherits its mission to transform the face of the earth. Culture in the aesthetic sense safeguards something of its spiritual depth.” (Eagleton 2014, 174) So, abolishing this depth of universe, this real transcendence, is the only way to leave religion and God behind (and not beyond), in history. And, for Eagleton, only postmodernism managed to remove this depth, and thus, the God and every possibility of His secular surrogates, simply by abolishing metaphysic. “Depth and interiority belong to a

clapped-out metaphysics, and to eradicate them is to abolish God by rooting out the underground places where he has been concealing himself.” (Eagleton 2014, 187) In this way we are unable to conceive God nor his death, so there is no void that is needed to be filled with something else. Yet, there are lot of various systems today that are trying to be alternative concepts and secular surrogates for religion and God. One of them is science, and in this paper I will present Daniel Dennett's idea about *Design Space* as Beyond, or, as horizontal transcendence.

2. *Daniel Dennett's Design Space*

Daniel Dennett is the author of twelve and a co-author of several books, with over three hundred scientific papers, and with the constant presence in the public and media. He is certainly one of the most influential living philosophers and authors in the West. His work is characterized by intellectual precision of thought and ideas, clarity and sharpness attitude, humor and exceptional elegance in public speaking, penetrating power, and arguments from various fields of science and philosophy. All this makes him one of the brightest stars of the academic world.

In over thirty years of philosophical and scientific work, Dennett became extremely influential in various areas primarily in (analytic) philosophy, but indirectly also in some scientific and social areas.

Educated and trained in the Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophical school, as a student of W. von Orman Quine at Harvard and later doctoral student at Oxford University in G. Ryle, with his philosophy is trying to fill a gap that has emerged after explicit rejection of dualism as a concept of reality and human explanations as single being with two aspects (or with two substances) of existence, and disorientation and rejection of materialism, i.e. behaviorism, which did not satisfy the philosophical and scientific expectations as did completely deny even the possibility of the existence of mental contents in the world.

Dennett develops this idea about Design Space in his famous book *Darwin's dangerous idea*. This book is comprehensive review of Darwinist thinking not just in biology, but also in philosophy and other humanistic and social sciences. There is only small, but important problem with Design Space and that is the fact that Dennett didn't define it in his book or in some other places, so I will present my understanding of this Space, and then will briefly show how Dennett speaks about it.

2.1 Design Space and The Tree of Life

As I could understand Dennett, this Design Space represents logical and real (but probably non-existing in ontological order) place where we can find all design that exists, and even more — all the possible design that could ever there be (taken logical, physical and biological laws in consideration). And as such, I think that it can be considered as new or, scientific version of transcendence — the real place where everything that exists is based.

Important presupposition for Design Space is various types of possibility: logical, physical, biological and historical possibility. Logical possibility means that is possible whatever is non-contradictory, physical possibility means that is possible whatever occurs within physical limits and laws, biological possibility means that is possible whatever is within biological limits and laws. Historical possibility is the most extensive possibility (when the actual and possible is in question, taken for history itself), and as such is determined on historical contexts and events that did or did not happened, while at the same time they could happened. So, to show what Dennett is trying to say, there are some impossibilities that are *a priori* determined: logical impossibility is rounded square, physical impossibility is to travel faster than the speed of light, biological impossibility is to have living being without metabolism and historical impossibility is “simply a matter of opportunities passed up.” (Dennett 1995, 106) For first three types of possibility it is necessary that they fit into *a priori* settings (laws of logic, physic and biology), while for historical possibility it is not necessary to comply within historical laws, since they are not *a priori* given, and there is no such things as historical laws in the sense of these previously mentioned laws. History is conditioned by context, or by events that are placed into casual chains depending one on another, and all these previously mentioned possibilities. To explain these possibilities and impossibilities, Dennett speaks about Superman, who is flaying faster than the speed of light, which is logically possible, but physically impossible, since as much we know considering physical laws, nothing can travel faster than speed of light. On the other hand, Duperman, who is traveling faster than speed of light without moving anywhere is and logically and physically impossible. Mythological creatures such as flying horses are physically impossible to fly, but not biologically. When speaking about relationship on physical and biological possibilities we are speaking about history, actual and possible one. More precisely, we are speaking about evolution. In this context historical possibility means that the actual is determined by actual casual evolutionary chain that easily could be different than this one that we know. This means that the hypothesis that only the actual is possible is wrong when historical possibilities are in question, and to some extent even biological possibilities. (Dennett 1995,

104–106) Actual history presents just small portion of all possible histories or historical casual chains (evolutions) and all possible creatures that could happen to be real and actual today, but they didn't. This real and actual history is the Tree of Life which grows in this Design Space as only that is actual and real. All other histories are possible and real but not actual. At this place it is important to notice that (even it could seem like that) this Design Space doesn't mean parallel universes in which we can find various realities that are all actual side by side. It is only one Space with one Tree that is actual, and all other possibilities are real but non-actual.

Next presupposition is at the same time a request to understand evolution as an algorithm that includes the Principle of accumulation of design. Given some regularities in nature and vast amounts of time, Natural Selection offers ways of producing more complex design. "An algorithm is a certain sort of formal process that can be counted on—logically—to yield a certain sort of result whenever it is run or instantiated." (Dennett 1995, 50) And algorithm is the reason why Darwin's idea is dangerous one: "the algorithmic level is the level that best accounts for the speed of the antelope, the wing of the eagle, the shape of the orchid, the diversity of species, and all the other occasions for wonder in the world of nature. It is hard to believe that something as mindless and mechanical as an algorithm could produce such wonderful things. No matter how impressive the products of an algorithm, the underlying process always consists of nothing but a set of individually mindless steps succeeding each other without the help of any intelligent supervision; they are automatic by definition." (Dennett 1995, 59) And this algorithm does not remain applicable only on biological level, but on every level that exists (cultural, social...). There is only one Design Space, and all possible designs are in it. What is actual in Design Space is the Tree of Life, and everything else is unrealized but real possibility. This Tree of Life includes biology, culture, society and everything that exists from bacteria to human minds. This Tree of Life is all actual forms of life, and Design Space is its beyond, its transcendence.

2.2 Two libraries as models for Design Space

Dennett uses image of two libraries to show how this Design Space is possible to conceive. He takes the concept of Library of Babel from Argentinean poet Jorge Luis Borges as a starting point for introducing his concept of Library of Mendel. These two libraries represent imagined, logically consistent multidimensional space where one can find every possible book (Library of Babel) or genome (Library of Mendel). This means that in Library of Babel we can find all actual books, and also every possible book, and every possible variation of actual books. In the Library of Mendel we can find all

actual genomes and all possible genomes and variations of one. “The actual genomes that have ever existed are a Vanishingly small subset of the combinatorially possible genomes, just as the actual books in the worlds libraries are a Vanishingly small subset of the books in the imaginary Library of Babel.” (Dennett 1995, 124) These two images served Dennett to give some concrete shape and model for his concept of Design Space which is foundation for all design that really exists. “The Library of Mendel (or its twin, the Library of Babel — they are contained in each other, after all) is as good an approximate model of Universal Design Space as we could ever need to think about. In the last four billion years or so, the Tree of Life has been zigzagging through this Vast multidimensional space, branching and blooming with virtually unimaginable fecundity, but nevertheless managing to fill only Vanishingly small portion of that space of the Possible with Actual designs.” (Dennett 1995, 143)

2.3 Design Space as Beyond

For some sort of conclusion on this Dennett's concept, I will direct our attention toward Eagleton's idea and critic of various secular surrogates of transcendence which says that we can leave God and religion behind us only if we abandon metaphysic and transcendence, even if it is horizontal and false one. What we can see with this idea of Design Space is one attempt to smuggle metaphysical concept of transcendence inside science and its narrative.

“Spinoza called his highest being God or Nature (*Deus sive Natura*), expressing a sort of pantheism. There have been many sorts of pantheism, but they usually lacked a convincing explanation about just how God is distributed in the whole of nature. Darwin offers us one: it is in the distribution of Design throughout nature, creating, in the Tree of Live, an utterly unique and irreplaceable creation, an actual pattern in the immeasurable reaches of Design Space that could never be exactly duplicated in its many details. What is design work? It is that wonderful wedding of chance and necessity, happening in a trillion places at once, at a trillion different levels. And what miracle caused it? None. It just happened to happen, in the fullness of time. You could even say, in a way, that Tree of Life created itself. (...) Is this Tree of Life a God one could worship? Pray to? Fear? Probably not. But it did make the ivy twine and the sky so blue... The Tree of Life is neither perfect nor infinite in space or time, but it is actual, and if it is not Anselm's “Being greater than which nothing can be conceived”, it is surely a being that is greater than anything any of us will ever conceive of in detail worthy of its detail. Is something sacred? Yes, say I with Nietzsche. I could not pray to it, but I can stand in affirmation of its magnificence. This world is sacred.” (Dennett 1995, 520)

3. *Transcending the Transcendence?*

To conclude this short presentation of various secular surrogates of transcendence I will just shortly emphasize one important fact. For world to be sacred, we need to postulate some innate meaning to it or inner sense of itself, and something where the world is based in/on which establishes meaning for the world. Religions say it is the transcendent God, Enlightenment say it is the Reason, and Dennett says it is Design Space. The difference is that first place is true transcendence (vertical, categorical and qualitative different from the world, as we can see in various philosophical and theological traditions), while other two are horizontally located within this universe without any qualitative or categorical difference between transcendence and this world. And that is the difference that makes real and a crucial difference!

Bibliography:

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Abstract

DENNETT'S DESIGN SPACE AS SECULAR FORM OF TRANSCENDENCE

In this paper I will try to shortly present a secular surrogates and forms of transcendence which we can find in various cultural, political and social contexts. And what is important to notice, is that all of these forms are horizontally located inside this world, and as such they represent beyond as *something* that is inside this universe, while, by its (traditional) definition, it should be outside. I will speak about transcendence (secular forms of transcendence) that becomes worldliness, briefly pointing some important moments in this process of lousing religion's authorities over transcendence. In second part of this paper I will present Daniel Dennett's idea *Design Space* which can be understood as some form of transcendence (or Beyond) based and understood in scientific worldview.

KEY WORDS: Dennett, Design Space, Eagleton, God, secular surrogates, transcendence, Tree of Life.

