

PHIL 3923H: Deception and Delusion

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Dennett, “Setting Off on the Right Foot” and “True Believers”

“Setting Off on the Right Foot”

- In this book, Dennett aims to give an account of *folk psychology* that vindicates many of its *intentional attitudes*. First, what is folk psychology?

... the perspective that invokes the family of “mentalistic” concepts, such as belief, desire, knowledge, fear, pain, expectation, intention, understanding, dreaming, imagination, self-consciousness, and so on. (7)

An intentional attitude, in this case, is a psychological state that has propositional content. This propositional content tell us what the psychological state is *about*. For example, beliefs and desires are intentional attitudes that are always about something. My belief that grass is green is *about* grass and its greenness. The proposition ‘grass is green’ is the content of that attitude.

- In “Setting Off on the Right Foot”, Dennett makes explicit some of the basic assumptions that drive his theory of intentionality:

Assumption 1: Mentalism

Dennett takes folk psychology seriously, but/and acknowledges that it could be proven wrong (just like folk physics). In the end, Dennett thinks that the mentalistic concepts of folk psychology are vindicated. In this regard he differs from, say, Behaviorists like B.F. Skinner, who argued that the sciences should rid themselves of such mentalistic talk.

Assumption 2: Naturalism

Dennett endorses a naturalism about philosophical method in the sense that he sees philosophy as working in accord with science. He does not think that philosophy should issue *a priori* first principles that restrict or preempt scientific theorizing.

My sense that philosophy is allied with, and indeed continuous with, the physical sciences grounds both my modesty about philosophical method and my optimism about philosophical progress. (5)

Assumption 3: Scientific Methodology

Dennett is a physicalist/materialist. He believes that the mind is a part of the physical world and that it is best investigated using the methods of physical science.

I declare my starting point to be the objective, materialistic, third-person world of the physical sciences. (5)

For Dennett, this methodology is largely based on the track-record of its successes.

“True Believers”

- Q: Is it even possible, *in the broadest sense*, that one could believe that rabbits are birds? (14) If so, then what about that 3 is more than 4?
- Two supposedly opposing views regarding belief attribution are commonly distinguished:

Realism: Whether a person believes a certain proposition is a purely objective matter with a definite answer settled by the internal facts about that person’s nervous system.

Interpretationism: There is no objective fact of the matter regarding belief attributions. Rather, the correctness of such attributions depends on our interests and other context-sensitive facts.

Dennett claims his position is some combination of these two. Belief is an objective phenomenon, but it can be investigated and discovered only from the intentional stance.

What it is to be a true believer is to be an *intentional system*, a system whose behavior is reliably and voluminously predictable via the intentional strategy. (15)

- Three stances: the physical stance, the design stance, and the intentional stance.

1. Physical stance: "...if you want to predict the behavior of a system, determine its physical constitution (perhaps all the way down to the micro-physical level) and the physical nature of the impingements upon it, and use your knowledge of the laws of physics to predict the outcome for any input." (16)

Laplace's demon: a mythical creature that computes all future outcomes by considering the complete, current microphysical state of affairs of the world and then generating predictions via applications of the laws of physics.

2. Design stance: "...where one ignores the actual (possibly messy) details of the physical constitution of an object, and, on the assumption that it has a certain design, predicts that it will behave *as it is designed to behave* under various circumstances." (16–17)

3. Intentional stance: "...first you decide to treat the object whose behavior is to be predicted as a rational agent; then you figure out what beliefs that agent ought to have, given its place in the world and its purpose. Then you figure out what desires it ought to have, on the same considerations, and finally you predict that this rational agent will act to further its goals in the light of its beliefs. A little practical reasoning from the chosen set of beliefs and desires will in many — but not all — instances yield a decision about what the agent ought to do; that is what you predict the agent *will* do." (17)

- Do note that mostly true beliefs are attributed to intentional systems, and there must be a special story (about forgetfulness, cognitive malfunction, deception, etc.) for the presence of false beliefs. Dennett's fundamental rule for using the intentional stance is to attribute to a system the beliefs and desires that it ought to have. So, according to Dennett, believers are largely rational by the very nature of the intentional stance. How rational? Dennett is vague:

One starts with the ideal of perfect rationality and revises downward as circumstances dictate. That is, one starts with the assumption that people believe all the implications of their beliefs and believe no contradictory pairs of beliefs ... Instances of irrationality, or of finitely powerful capacities of inferences, raise particularly knotty problems of interpretation, which I will set aside on this occasion. (21)

We will study, in great detail, many situations in which people are far from this rational ideal.

- Reflect on the role that language has in overspecifying belief and desire

attributions (as discussed on pp. 20–21).

- Note how the intentional stance can be applied to many other animals, artifacts, and even plants and inanimate objects. (22) On Dennett’s view there is no distinction between “real” intentionality and “as if” intentionality.

- But isn’t the intentional stance simply a useful approach given our limited knowledge of the physical facts? Doesn’t the physical stance (or maybe the design stance) offer the *real* explanation of our behavior? Dennett resists this conclusion, using Nozick’s thought experiment about Martians to make his point.

Nozick’s Martians: These are creatures that have Laplacean demon-like abilities to predict our behavior purely from the physical stance. (25–28)

Dennett denies that we fail to be intentional systems from the point of view of Nozick’s Martians. Instead, these Martians are missing an objectively existing real pattern — being an intentional system is not relative to an interpreter. These real patterns are comparable to the real patterns that emerge in Conway’s Game of Life. (37–39)

Here’s a link to a good simulation of the Game of Life:

<http://www.bitstorm.org/gameoflife/>

- While Dennett holds that beliefs and desires are objective phenomena, he stresses that there could still be cases in which it is indeterminate what beliefs and desires someone possesses. This indeterminacy is itself an objective fact. The number and nature of an intentional system’s inputs/outputs determine the degree to which the content of its intentional states should be specified. This is the lesson of the thermostat example from pp. 29–31.

Thermostats are “real” intentional systems, because when more inputs and outputs are added there is no point at which it “magically” turns into an intentional system (though it is clearly an intentional system once many inputs and outputs are added). (32)

Q: Is this really how Dennett is arguing here? Is this a good form of argument in general?

- Q: Why does the intentional stance work so well?

A: Evolution has designed us to be rational. But, we do not know the details about *how* our biological mechanisms underlie our intentional states. (33)

◦ One proposal regarding how our biological mechanisms underlie our intentional states is Jerry Fodor's *Language of Thought Hypothesis*.

Language of Thought Hypothesis: "The inferences we attribute to rational creatures will be mirrored by the physical, causal processes in the hardware; the *logical* form of the propositions believed will be copied in the *structural* form of the states in correspondence with them. This is the hypothesis that there is a *language of thought* coded in our brains, and our brains will eventually be understood as symbol manipulating systems in at least rough analogy with computers." (34)

Dennett denies that a language of thought is necessary to vindicate intentional states, though he thinks it is a reasonable hypothesis.