

PHIL 3923H: Deception and Delusion  
Prof. Funkhouser  
Dennett, “Three Kinds of Intentional Psychology”

- Separate these conceptual and causal questions:

Conceptual questions: What do all  $x$ 's have in common?  
Conceptual questions are searching for *definitions*.

Causal questions: How do the  $x$ 's fulfill their common function?  
Causal questions are searching for *theories*.

The answers to the conceptual questions can reduce to the answers to the causal questions. For example, what magnets have in common is their ability to attract iron (conceptual). They attract iron in virtue of microphysical conditions  $Y$  (causal). So, the ability to attract iron reduces to microphysical conditions  $Y$ . We can ask if a similar reduction is possible for folk-psychological predicates, like believing and desiring. That is, can folk-psychology be seen as an approximately true theory that can be reduced to a more rigorous science?

- Dennett offers a rough definition of ‘belief’:

Very roughly, folk psychology has it that *beliefs* are information-bearing states of people that arise from perceptions and that, together with appropriately related *desires*, lead to intelligent *action*. (46)

And on p. 49 Dennett presents three principles behind the intentional stance. Again, note the rational/design idealization that is involved here.

- On rationality:

◦ Evolution does not give us perfect rationality. Instead, it bestows us with cognitive skills that were simply good enough for our ancestors to get by. Evolution is limited and “blind”, and will select what merely works. And often perfect rationality is either not an option or not necessary — sometimes

cognitive short-cuts and “true enough” beliefs were good enough. (51)

◦ Dennett gives little weight to the empirical evidence offered by cognitive psychologists, such as Kahneman and Tversky, that purportedly shows our irrationality. Dennett does not doubt the data, he simply considers these to be exceptional cases. (52)

• Dennett’s instrumentalism:

... people really do have beliefs and desires, on my version of folk psychology, just the way they really have centers of gravity and the earth has an Equator. Reichenbach distinguished between two sorts of referents for theoretical terms: *illata* — posited theoretical entities — and *abstracta* — calculation-bound entities or logical constructs. Beliefs and desires of folk psychology (but not all mental events and states) are *abstracta*. (53)

This is still a realism about belief. (For more of his discussion of realism and instrumentalism, see pp. 71–81.)

• Distinguish: implicitly and explicitly stored beliefs (55–56). Dennett warns against thinking that there must be some structural similarity shared by all those with a common belief.

• Q: How can *abstracta* cause “. . . not only actions, but blushes, verbal slips, heart attacks, and the like”? (57)

◦ Dennett disparages “*abstracta*-causation”, in particular intentional attitude causation:

One can call this a causal explanation because it talks about causes, but it is surely as unspecific and unhelpful as a causal explanation can get. (57)

◦ Dennett proposes that we distinguish our more abstract concept of belief from the more concrete, realization-based, concept. Originally, we have folk-psychology (the first kind of intentional psychology, to make use of Dennett’s title). But once we separate these concepts of folk-belief, we can then generate two new kinds of psychological theories:

### 1. Intentional System Theory

This kind of psychology treats the agent as a “black box” and wholly ignores realization details. Instead, normative principles of rationality guide belief/desire attributions and action-prediction. For this reason, we can think of this kind of psychology as a branch of philosophy. The realization-neutrality allows for generalizations that hold across species, etc.

Intentional system theory deals just with the performance specifications of believers while remaining silent on how the systems are to be implemented. In fact this neutrality with regard to implementation is the most useful feature of intentional characterizations. (59)

## 2. Sub-personal Cognitive Psychology

This is the investigation into how our brains implement the intentional system theory. How, for example, does it get the semantics from mere syntax (see p. 61)?

- Q: Can any of the intentional psychologies reduce to another? Dennett thinks it is possible that folk psychology reduces to intentional system theory. He compares this to other, well-known, proposed reductions.