

PHIL 3923H: Deception and Delusion
Prof. Funkhouser
Dennett, “Making Sense of Ourselves”

- Stephen Stich raised the worry, against Dennett’s intentional stance theory, that it cannot handle cases of irrationality and similar cognitive mistakes. The charge is that not only will the theory be unable to predict or explain such cognitive errors, it might not even be able to describe the intentional states of a person committing these errors.

- Example: The Lemonade Stand Case

Q: Which mistake did the boy make? Note that some mistakes seem too irrational even to be possible. E.g., the boy surely does not (cannot?) believe that $25-12=13$ *and* that $25-12=11$.

- It is important to separate cases merely involving false belief from those involving irrationality.

... and while we might have told that tale so that the boy simply had this false belief – and didn’t believe (8) – (we can imagine, for instance, that he thought that’s what his father told him when he asked), this would yield us a case that was not at all a plausible case of either irrationality or even miscalculation, but just a case of a perfectly rational thinker with a single false belief (85–86)

Notice that there are some combinations of beliefs that Dennett thinks are too irrational for us to attribute them to the boy. (86)

- Dennett claims that we cannot give a reason (i.e., belief-desire explanation) for the boy’s mistake, since the mistake is not rational. We have to revert to another stance in order to describe the behavior.

The boy is basically on top of the situation, and is no mere change-giving robot; nevertheless, we must descend from the level of beliefs and desires to some other level of theory to describe his mistake, since no account in terms of his beliefs and desires will make sense completely. At some point our account will have to cope with the sheer senselessness of the transition in any error. (87)

- Contrast cases in which people acknowledge and correct their error, with those in which they do not acknowledge the error and (unabashedly) persist in making similar errors.

- In “Reflections”, Dennett insists that in cases of cognitive error, like the lemonade seller, there is no fact of the matter about what one believes. But this indeterminacy is comparable (and related to) the indeterminacy in language translation that was famously argued for by Quine. (104)

- A hypothesis to avoid the charge of irrationality: forgetting — e.g., the tennis date with Paul (88–89)

- We even apply the intentional stance to ourselves, and we do not have direct (and certainly not infallible) access to our own beliefs and desires. (91) We often *make up* intentional interpretations of our behavior *after the fact*.

- Belief/desire attributions must be holistic. And it is not at all straightforward how we should interpret “sentences in the head”.

Of course sometimes there are sentences in our heads, which is hardly surprising, considering that we are language-using creatures. These sentences, though, are as much in need of interpretation via a determination of our beliefs and desires as are the public sentences we utter. (93)

Example: Jones’s claim that “It is raining.” (92–93)

- How strong should the rationality constraints on belief and desire attribution be? Stich argues that requiring logical consistency and/or deductive closure is too strong. (94) And it would be too weak were we to count everything that evolution provided us with as rational. Dennett agrees.

- Dennett claims that evolution guarantees that most of our beliefs will be true and our belief-forming mechanisms rational. But the standards for rationality should not be the “intro logic” standards. (Note Dennett’s comments about satisficing and the benefits, in terms of skipped calculations, of sometimes leaping to conclusions.) Nor should the standards be those of any other formal system, as rationality is a pre-theoretic concept. (96–98)

- Dennett claims that he can rightly insist that rationality is at the core of intentionality, while nevertheless not owing us an account of the nature of rationality when presenting his theory of intentionality. Why does he think this?

First, he is very liberal about his use of ‘rational’:

I want to use “rational” as a general-purpose term of cognitive approval. (97)

- The dispute with Stich over belief attribution:

Stich: We attribute beliefs and desires to other people by projecting ourselves into their position and asking what we would believe and desire in that position.

Dennett: We attribute beliefs and desires to other people by asking what a rational person would believe and desire in that position.

On pp. 99–101, Dennett provides cases where his procedure might diverge from Stich’s procedure, but he also suggests that Stich’s procedure might reduce to his.

- In “Reflections”, Dennett returns to the lemonade seller and frog cases and the question of what they really believe. Here he takes on Realism again.

- What is the content of a frog’s belief — that there is food to the right, an insect, a physical object? Compare this to the thermostat case or a dog chasing a squirrel up a tree.

- The Realist thinks that there is one objectively true way of specifying the propositional content of any belief. Language makes it possible for us to have thoughts with such precise and sophisticated content.

But the guiding Realist vision of “propositional attitude psychology” of human beings is still for many people in stark contrast to what it seems comfortable to acknowledge in the case of the frog as an intentional system: an intentional stance characterization of a frog is always an idealization, and any idealization will fit the brute facts at the physical or design level only so well. Beyond the facts about just where and how the best approximation at the intentional level proves to be misleading, there simply are no facts about what the frog “really believes.” The strategy, applied to a frog, neither needs nor permits that sort of precision. (116)