

INTENTIONALITY, II: DENNETT

Philosophers influenced by W.V. Quine or by continental hermeneuticists maintain that what a subject believes or desires is entirely a matter of how that person is interpreted or translated into someone else's preferred idiom for one purpose or another, there being no antecedent or inner fact of the matter. A distinctive though slightly weaker version of this view is that of Dennett.

Dennett's instrumentalism

The Identity Theorists and the Functionalists (Machine or Teleological) joined common sense and current cognitive psychology in understanding mental states and events both as internal to human subjects and as causes. Beliefs and desires in particular are thought to be caused by perceptual or other cognitive events, and as in turn conspiring from within to cause behavior. If Armstrong's or Lewis' theory of mind is correct, this idea is not only commonsensical but a conceptual truth; if Functionalism is correct, it is at least a metaphysical fact.

In rallying to the inner-causal story, of course the Identity Theorists and Functionalists broke with the Behaviorists, for Behaviorists did not think of mental items as entities, as inner, or as causes. Behaviorists paraphrased mental ascriptions in terms of putative responses to hypothetical stimuli. More recently (though under the direct influence of Ryle), Dennett denies that beliefs and desires are causally active inner states of people, and maintains instead that belief- and desire-ascriptions are merely calculational devices, that happen to have predictive usefulness. Such ascriptions are often objectively true, but not in virtue of describing inner mechanisms.

Thus Dennett is an instrumentalist about propositional attitudes such as belief and desire. (An "instrumentalist" about Xs is a theorist who claims that although sentences about 'Xs' are often true, they do not really describe entities of a special kind, but only serve to systematize more familiar phenomena. E.g., we are all instrumentalists about "the average American homeowner," who has exactly 2.3 children.) To ascribe a "belief" or a "desire" is not to describe some segment of physical reality, Dennett says, but is more like moving a group of beads in an abacus or doing vector sums by parallelogram of forces in kinematics.

There are three "stances" from which we can predict the behavior of some behavior—device, creature or human being: The physical stance (physics or other low-level science), the design stance (program or otherwise functional), and the **intentional stance**. Behavior prediction from the intentional stance is most

fundamentally a matter of extrapolating rationally from what a subject *ought* to believe and *ought to* want in his/her circumstances; we then presume that the subject does believe and want those things, and predict the appropriate behavior. This is exactly what we do with laptops and pocket calculators, and even with thermostats (when we don't know how the thermostat works). And this epistemological strategy works astoundingly well.

A thing S is a believer, Dennett says, just in case S's behavior is reliably predictable from the intentional stance, and the intentional stance is indispensable. (The indispensability clause is required to rule out the lectern example). S believes *that P* just in case to attribute that particular belief to S would result in good behavioral predictions. Notice that Dennett does not assume that anyone actually does do any attributing.

His case for this view:

1. He argues from the foregoing epistemology of the intentional stance, i.e., of belief- and desire-ascriptions. Viz., he boldly just identifies the truth-makers of those ascriptions with their verification-conditions; why should we think that what constitutes a propositional attitude should be anything over and above the evidence we have for it? He challenges inner-cause theorists to show why his instrumentalism does not accommodate all the actual evidence. Reply: This is just steam-age, Positivist verificationism. We should just reject any inference from the epistemology of a thing to the metaphysical nature of that thing. Rejoinder: (See next argument.)

2. The epistemology of the intentional stance contains ineliminably normative elements: "*ought to believe*," "*ought to want*," and the assumption of *rationality*. Dennett argues that if purely normative assumptions are required for the licensing of an ascription, then the ascription cannot itself be a purely factual description of a plain state of affairs. The epistemology of inner causes is well known and standard, and it does not include normative assumptions.

3. Dennett's instrumentalism requires no psychosemantics, and so avoids the biggest obstacle to Representationalism. (Dennett adds more arguments against the "language of thought," two of which we have already considered. Most of the others rely on caricatures.)

But he also thinks it quite unlikely that any science will ever turn up any distinctive inner-causal mechanism that would be shared by all the possible subjects that had a particular belief. I agree, though it hardly follows that there is no such mechanism.

Objections

1. Dennett's formulation, "A person S believes that P iff, were one to ascribe the belief that P to S, one would get good behavioral predictions," is circular! It uses the expression "belief that P" in what is supposed to be an explication of that very concept. Replies: First, Dennett is not *defining the term* "belief that P," but only offering a metaphysical hypothesis as to what believing really is; so he is not offering a circular definition as in "Jejune, adj.: Said of things that are jejune." Second, he does really mean that ascriptions-of-belief (hyphenated) are conceptually prior to so-called "beliefs"; beliefs are second-class items, constructed out of the more concrete, more real ascribings. If you want to know what an ascription-of-belief is, look to our practices in the intentional strategy.

2. How does Dennett do vis-à-vis Fodor's official conditions? First, does he agree that a propositional attitude is a relation between the subject and something? Yes and no. *Sentences* play *sort of* a role in his story: (1) They express our interpretations of people's utterances, and can be taken as construals of nonverbal behavior. (2) Dennett puts his rationality requirements in terms of deductive logic, inductive logic, confirmation theory and decision theory. Those formal disciplines apply to sentences or to sentential formulas. That's as much of a relation as Dennett thinks is needed.

Second, Vendler's Condition: Ditto.

Third (as always ignoring Fodor's own III), logical form: Of course. If belief and desire contents didn't have logical forms, they couldn't figure in theoretical or practical reasoning; the rationality requirements couldn't apply.

Fourth, "meshing with" cog. sci.: Dennett simply rejects that requirement. Though cog. sci. by its nature posits internal representations, the latter are subpersonal, like in the visual system and in the language module. No scientific work suggests that *commonsensical propositional attitudes* should have anything to do with internal representations.

3. Dennett's epistemology is too liberal. Even if pocket calculators have "beliefs" and "desires," thermostats and lightning rods simply do not. For that matter, Dennett's view firmly applies to the Tinfoil Man, and counts him as a believer. But "he"'s only a piece of Tinfoil!

Thus, Dennett's instrumentalism is not too far from Ryle's Behaviorism; Do Objections 1 and 2 apply? Can Dennett allow that we introspect episodic propositional attitudes? Not clear; it's not obvious that we can introspect beliefs or desires. We can introspect judgements, but as before Dennett seems to admit that. Though he hardly ever mentions them, he is in effect a functionalist about judgements; he thinks they are inputs to the speech center.

4. Never mind such degenerate examples as the Tinfoil Man; there are cases in which it's true of some human being that, were one to ascribe to that person the belief that P, good predictions would ensue, yet the person *does not* believe that P. E.g., the actor in mid-performance, or a spy who for decades plays a role in an enemy nation. The Rylean rebuts this objection by pointing out that actors and other pretenders have dispositions that ordinary people don't, such as the disposition to drop the pretend-behavior when the pretense is no longer needed. But Dennett does not put his view in terms of dispositions, so it is not clear how he could reply.

5. Attributability of propositional attitudes depends, for Dennett, on unavailability of the design and physical stances. But in theory a stance may be available to one kind of creature but not to another. You and I cannot predict Geoff's behavior except by the intentional stance, but a Laplacean Martian could predict it from the physical stance. So a relativism ensues: Geoff has beliefs and desires modulo us crude and feckless humans, but modulo a Martian he has no propositional attitudes at all. So it looks as though our attitude ascriptions aren't *really* true after all; they're only true-for-us. Probable reply: Truth-for-us is truth enough in this case, *de facto* just plain true. There aren't any Laplacean Martians or other creatures who can apply the physical or design stance to human beings, and probably there couldn't be. And the propositional-attitude concepts are our concepts, made by us for ourselves.

6. In cognitive psychology, beliefs and desires interact closely with the internal representations posited by the psychologist. Commonsense beliefs and desires are referred to in experiments, pretty much interchangeably with the internal representations. In abnormal psychology, design-stance considerations are brought to bear on the patient's neurotic beliefs and desires. And as Dennett has sometimes admitted, commonsense belief-desire descriptions of people and cognitive psychology sometimes augment or correct each other. How is any of this possible, if belief and desire ascriptions are purely instrumental while the cognitive representations are real inner states of the subjects? And why would the two only polysemously intentional phenomena have anything to do with each other?