

19. The intentional strategy

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1 Two approaches

Dennett points out that there are two approaches to the question of the reality of propositional attitudes that one may take, and are often considered incompatible with each other:

Realism: There is a perfectly objective fact of the matter whether a particular person has a given belief, just like there is an objective fact of the matter whether that person has two arms, or whether she is infected with a particular virus. The facts that decide whether someone has a particular belief are internal to the believer, possibly having to do with the state of her brain.

Interpretationism: There are no objective facts of the matter whether a particular person has a given belief. The question whether someone has a particular belief is more like the question whether something is tasty, or whether someone has talent. It is ultimately subjective. Our judgments about someone's beliefs may depend on the interests of the person who ascribes the belief.

Dennett claims to offer a view that has a bit of both. On one hand, it is realist in the sense that it claims that beliefs are perfectly objective phenomena. On the other hand, it is interpretationist in that it claims that beliefs can only be understood from the point of view of someone who adopts a certain predictive strategy. The point of Dennett's paper is to explain what that strategy amounts to.

2 Different strategies, and the intentional strategy

A predictive strategy is simply a strategy that one may use to make predictions about something's behavior. Different strategies may attempt to characterize different behaviors. For instance, we can consider the physical strategy. We may say that something is a physical system if it behaves according to the laws of physics, together with observations about its physical constitution and its interaction with its environment, also understood in physical terms.

Or take the design strategy. We can predict the behavior of certain things, like living beings, computer programs, and man-made apparatuses by means of this sort of strategy. When we use this kind of strategy, we may abstract from the particular physical constitution of the object whose behavior we want to describe. Instead, we start with the assumption that the object has a certain design, and this will allow us to predict that the object will behave as it has been designed to behave in various circumstances.

Different strategies may be useful for different purposes. Some people think, for instance, that we could predict the behavior of absolutely everything by using the physical strategy. Whether this

is true or not, we can all agree that this would be highly impractical, or even practically impossible. In such cases, we may appeal to other, more practically accessible stances, like the design stance.

Dennett thinks that in some cases, even the design stance is not practically accessible. Some of these cases require a different kind of strategy, which he calls *the intentional strategy*. Dennett briefly describes this strategy as follows:

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.

One of the rules of the intentional strategy can be seen as follows: attribute as beliefs all the truths relevant to the system's interests or desires that the system's experience to date has made available.

We attribute beliefs to an intentional system depending on the beliefs that the system *ought to have*. Similarly, we attribute desires on the basis of the desires that the system *ought to have*. When it comes to desires, Dennett thinks that there is some sort of bedrock of desires that we usually attribute to people: the desire to survive, to be entertained, and so on. It is on the basis of these basic desires that we attribute other desires and beliefs. **Question:** In passing, Dennett offers a brief consideration against something like Fodor's view of propositional attitudes, what does he say?

We use a similar strategy to attribute rationality to people: we attribute them the ability, for instance, to know the consequences of their beliefs that might be of interest for them, and we operate on this assumption.

Dennett thinks that this predictive strategy works with people most of the time. Interestingly, it also works with many other things: we can see other animals, computers and even plants to have behaviors predictable by means of this strategy. But of course, it would be ridiculous to claim that all those things have beliefs: plants, lightnings or lecterns don't have beliefs, so how should we make a distinction between the things that *really* have beliefs and desires from the things that don't?

3 True believers

It's important to note that the intentional strategy will work for nearly anything. Right now, my fan is on and it's running on its second speed. Why is it behaving that way? Using the intentional strategy, we can give an explanation of its behavior and predict its future behavior: my fan loves me, and like anyone (anything?) else, it wishes to be loved back. It also believes that I will love it back if it pushes air in my direction, since every time it does that, I make a happy face and say out loud that I really love that fan. Using this strategy, we can also predict its future behavior: on the assumption that it still wants me to love it, it will continue to work so that I continue to love it.

It's easy to see that we can give this kind of intentional explanation of the behavior or pretty much anything. But surely not everything has beliefs, so there must be cases in which the explanation works for the wrong reasons. Dennett is not so much concerned with the question where to draw the line between intentional and non-intentional systems as he is with *how* to draw it. His main point is this:

Indispensability of the intentional strategy: When we are dealing with truly intentional systems, the intentional strategy is indispensable in a practical sense. The intentional strategy gives us predictive power that we can get by no other method.

In the case of the fan, we get no predictive power from the use of the intentional strategy. We already knew how the fan was going to behave, and tailored our explanation to its behavior. This is not the case with people. In these cases, often the only practical strategy we have for predicting their behavior is the intentional strategy, or so Dennett thinks.

Objection: Can we really not get the same predictive power by other means? On the assumption that everything there is: objects, events, properties, etc. is physical, it should be possible for someone who knew all the physical data and all the physical laws, to make predictions as accurate (or even more accurate) as the predictions we get by using the intentional strategy. Thus, the intentional strategy is not indispensable. At best, it is *indispensable for us* in a purely practical sense: given our cognitive limitations, a fully physical explanation of everything is not cognitively available, and we are in the embarrassing position of having to use the intentional strategy. Ultimately, the objection comes to this: either the intentional stance is not indispensable, since a fully physical explanation could have at least as much predictive power as the intentional strategy, or the intentional stance is indispensable for us, but then whether something has beliefs and desires is only relative to the cognitive capacities of those who need to use the intentional stance. Either way, the consequences of Dennett's view are unpalatable.

We can illustrate with the following case:

Suppose, he [R. Nozick] suggested, some beings of vastly superior intelligence—from Mars, let us say—were to descend upon us, and suppose that we were to them as simple thermostats are to clever engineers. Suppose, that is, that they did not *need* the intentional stance—or even the design stance—to predict our behavior in all its detail. (p. 562)

Dennett attempts to respond to the objection as follows. He claims that even if the Martians could offer the same predictions of our behavior that we can make by using the intentional stance, unless they attributed beliefs, desires, and the like, they would be missing out on certain patterns. For there are many physical implementations of the same kinds of activities, all of which we can explain by means of a single psychological explanation.

For instance, suppose I find out that Swan Lake will be at the Lincoln Center next month, and I ask one of my friends to purchase tickets and meet me at night, to which she agrees. I make the prediction that she will buy the tickets and show them to me tonight. There are several ways in which she could purchase tickets: she could buy them online, she could call the Lincoln Center, or she could go to the ticket office and buy them in person. All these actions will ultimately lead to her showing me the tickets the week after, and any of them would have been equally effective. But of course, each of these courses of actions corresponds to different physical processes.

If someone using a purely physical stance made an accurate prediction, but missed the fact that all these different implementations of the process of buying the tickets would have been equally good, she would be missing important, objective patterns in the world, and so, her purely physical explanation would be missing something. In particular, it would be missing something that we need the intentional stance to explain. **Question:** Is this a good response to the objection? Couldn't these patterns also be described in purely physical terms? If that was the case, would there be a role for the intentional stance?

Dennett also thinks that the intentional stance is more explanatorily powerful in the following sense:

Informational economy: the intentional stance allows us to make predictions of behavior from very little information.

If we want to make physical predictions, we need to know a lot about the physical conditions of the world, perhaps even about the total physical conditions at a given time! Not so with the intentional stance.

Dennett also claims that the intentional stance is unavoidable in the following sense:

Self-ascription: The intentional stance is unavoidable with respect to oneself and one's fellow intelligent beings.

Dennett doesn't give much reason to accept this claim, but it seems compelling: you can't see yourself solely as a physical being constituted of particles. You seem to ascribe yourself beliefs and other attitudes, and insofar as you do this, you look at yourself from the intentional stance.

Ultimately, Dennett seems to accept that

all there is to a true believer is being a system whose behavior is reliably predictable via the intentional strategy, and hence *all there is* to really and truly believing that p (for any proposition p) is being an intentional system for which p occurs as a belief in the best (most predictive) interpretation. (p. 564)

Still, he thinks that this criterion of belief puts severe constraints on the complexity of the system we explain with the intentional stance. In the end, Dennett seems happy to adopt something like a functionalist view, thinking that for each belief or attitude that we ascribe using the intentional stance will be correlated with some functional property implemented by particular states in our brain.