

Handout #8b: Dennett

1. Realism v. Interpretationism—Define.

Dennett claims that his theory of belief and desire (or preference and credence) walks a line between realism and anti-realism about these states of mind. Is that true? Dennett use the reality of theoretical posits as an example — e.g. centers of gravity. Do your beliefs and desires have this degree of reality?

2. How the intentional strategy works.

The astrological strategy—predicting a person’s behavior based on her birthday. Unreliable and no conceivable mechanism. Is impugned too by the realization that people born on the same day act differently.

Physical strategy—predicting a behavior based on chemical or physical make-up. Some efficacy. Mood might be predicted on the basis of hormonal state and other bio-chemical factors (e.. neurotransmitter levels). And behavior is affected by mood. But it is not currently possible to explain or predict specific intentional acts on the basis of biochemical information alone.

The Design stance—e.g. alarm clocks. Functional and evolutionary explanations. How do these integrate with biochemical explanations in, e.g., in cognitive neuroscience explanations of sound perception?

The intentional stance

Input side—believes available facts; believes things that make actions rational in light of attributed desires; attribute desires that make actions rational in light of attributed beliefs.

Most generally—attribute beliefs and desire things ought to have given its place in the environment

3. Problem: Dennett says what it is to have beliefs and desires is to be effectively attributed them in an effort to predict thing’s behavior, but this is too liberal—thermostats, etc. Lectern example.

First answer—must be some predictive gain.

Problem: still too weak.

Second answer—behavioral flexibility which requires internal complexity.

Problem—Are there no internal constraints?

Dennett—no “magic moment”

Question—What do we say about vagueness?

4. The Reality of Patterns—The superscientist Martian and the ordinary man thought experiment (pp. 562-3).

5. Dennett’s claims about irrationality—cognitive pathology—no fact of the matter. Must descend to physical stance. True? What about trying to understand what is going on in their minds at the intentional level?

6. The weakness of Dennett's critique of Fodor. Dennett ends by arguing that LOT is an empirical view. But Fodor agrees with this. (Dennett says others don't, but he doesn't cite anyone.). Dennet is right, though, that Fodor's arguments for the LOT hypothesis are relatively conceptual or a priori and it is my sense that scientists are moving away from the LOT.