

Theories of Mind

Writing Assignment 1

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Samantha Lam

s0790004

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Describe and discuss Dennett's Intentional Stance, and how he distinguishes it from both realism and interpretationism. How does it relate to the physical stance? Discuss what you consider to be Stich's best criticism of Dennett's view. Overall do you find the Intentional Stance a convincing position - why or why not?

Due to the nature of the question posed, the layout of this essay falls naturally into two parts. First, I will be discussing Dennett's Intentional Stance; how he distinguishes it from realism and interpretationism and how it relates to the physical stance. Secondly, I will present what I consider to be Stich's best criticism of Dennett's view and my opinion on how convincing the Intentional Stance is to me.

In Dennett's "True Believers: The Intentional Strategy and Why it Works" (Lycan, 1990), Dennett states that realism and interpretationism are two opposing views on the nature of belief attribution. To describe the two briefly, realism is likened to having a belief that a person is 'infected' with an attribute, that the realist observer "can often make educated guesses of the state of another person with great reliability". Whereas an interpretationist would have a belief of another person intrinsically possessing certain attribute, e.g. having a certain style, talent etc., i.e. the interpretation observer would believe others to have certain properties (or qualities).

Despite citing these two views as opposing, Dennett claims that his Intentional Stance requires the two to be concurrent. In other words, he uses realism as a basis of his Intentional Stance but to implement it, he uses the interpretationism viewpoint. Furthermore, he considers the physical/design stance as a system for comparison. This physical stance is achieved by knowing the complete physical constitution of the system and its possible perturbations, and then using only the laws of physics as a means of prediction. Dennett addresses that although the physical stance is not always practically available, in principle, it should always work. This is the main reason that he chooses it as a candidate for comparison; in theory, it works

all the time. A refinement of this is the design stance - where one ignores the physical constitution of an object and instead focus on the assumption that it has a certain design such that it will 'behave' as the design intends it to.

Dennett furthermore proposes that when this design stance is inaccessible, that one should adopt the Intentional Stance, which is achieved by: *“first, treating the object whose behavior is to be predicted as a rational agent; then you figure out what beliefs it 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 belief.”* (p. 153).

Dennett then gives two criteria for how beliefs are formed :-

1. Exposure to x over a suitable period of time, is a normally sufficient condition for having beliefs about x . I.e. if one can sense an entity over a sufficiently long amount of time then one will have acquire beliefs about that particular entity.
2. It is assumed that people believe all implications of their beliefs and that they don't believe in contradictory information about the same belief. I.e., that humans are rational beings.

Criterion 2 in particular is challenged by Stich and I shall be referring back to this as part of my support for Stich's criticism. Desire is dealt with simply by attributing desire to a system if it believes 'what it desires' is good for it.

It is then in the Martian argument where Dennett aims to convince the reader that the Intentional Stance is 'more efficient' than the physical one. He claims that although the physicalist martians can 'predict our future' by predicting our physical actions, they lack *understanding* of our system. They have to consider something needlessly complicated even though the outcome is the same. E.g. as Dennett suggests, dialing a specific number on a phone is independent of how or which finger comes in contact with that number; all that matters is that the number was dialed for the outcome of the call.

Dennett further expands on the completeness of the Intentional Stance, how it can be extended to inanimate objects such as a thermostat having the 'belief' that a room is warm or cold and then attempts to explain *why* it works by the argument that "*evolution has designed human beings to be rational*" (p. 164). This Evolution argument is one of the few flaws of the Intentional Stance that Stich highlights. However, it is his criticism of Dennett's assumption of belief and rationality that I believe to be the most convincing.

To begin, I quote "*the terms 'belief', 'pain', etc. may be in the habits of thought of our society.*" (Stich, Dennett on Intentional Systems (p. 171), Lycan 1990) as the foremost insightful illustration of Stich's argument. It gives a first approximation of how Dennett's Intentional Stance fails. It gives me the impression that it is merely a form of social psychology, that one can *only* 'predict' another if this certain other conforms to the social norm. This follows from Stich's appeal to functionalism - "*such that if we were to adhere to it, then it threatens to establish that people have no beliefs at all*" (p. 172); we all have different brains, therefore different programs.

Dennett's Intentional Stance also relies heavily on the fact that a system *ought* to have beliefs and that it must believe in something that is consistent and non-contradictory. Stich challenges these points by giving examples such as one being allergic to chocolate yet still consuming it and one who collects things of no monetary value (or otherwise) other than being just an *irrational* obsession. These examples are not unusual in our 'normal' world, i.e. the system that Dennett attempts to predict with his Intentional Stance. Stich further notes that Dennett is acquainted with these 'flaws' yet (Dennett) is far from *clear* on what he proposes to do about them." Dennett appears to suggest two 'lines' to attack this problem - the 'hard' and the 'soft' (lines).

Briefly, the hard line is where one abides with the idealised notion of the Intentional Stance and tries to minimise the gap between the Intentional Stance's belief and desires with their psychological equivalents, whereas the soft line acknowledges the significant divergence between folk psychology and the Intentional Stance. Stich's argument against the hard line, again, takes into account the weakness of the definition of rationality. Dennett apparently often suggests that we cannot coherently describe a person whose beliefs "depart from the idealised standard", which would be analogous to outliers in a data set, outliers are exceptions and therefore are not important. (*"In extreme cases personalities may prove to be so unpredictable from the Intentional Stance that we abandon it."* (p. 175).)

Again, this supports my own opinion that Dennett's Intentional Stance is mostly just a refined form of social/folk psychology, there is not much that

is profoundly new here. Anything that ‘appears irrational’, outside of *expected* belief and desires is discarded and deemed a fault or special case in the system. To further this impression, Stich involves the concept of making a mistake versus ‘true’ irrationality, where he gives the example of a boy giving him the incorrect monetary change for his purchase of lemonade. Under Dennett’s Intentional Stance one would suppose the boy is irrational; he has given the wrong change which is not within his ‘belief system’, that a happy customer would benefit him. This infers that not everything that *appears* irrational is truly so. It would be more plausible to assume that there was a mistake in the boy’s course of action, that he may have calculated wrongly, or thought that he’d received a different amount to begin with or was, just plainly, absentminded. Surely (in tune with Stich’s exclamation) it would be rather harsh to call this boy irrational!

Overall, to put it simply, I do not find the Intentional Stance a convincing one. I have outlined Dennett’s Intentional Stance, how it relates to realism, interpretationism and the physical stance; how and why it would work. However, I have also made clear in what I consider Stich’s best criticism of it that I am more inclined to agree with Stich. The Intentional Stance largely depends on the existence and consistency of a belief system which is *too general*, in my opinion. As I had echoed throughout this piece, it is the close resemblance of the Intentional Stance to social psychology or its predecessor folk psychology and its failure to deal with the special cases of irrationality (which occur more frequently than not) which persuades me to not find the Intentional Stance convincing.

References

- [1] Daniel C. Dennett, *True Believers: The Intentional Strategy*. In William G. Lycan (Ed.), *Mind and Cognition, A Reader* (p. 150 - 167), 1990. Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

- [2] Stephen P. Stich, *Dennett on Intentional Systems*. In William G. Lycan (Ed.), *Mind and Cognition, A Reader* (p. 167 - 184), 1990. Blackwell Publishers Ltd.