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The Status of Folk Psychology

For Dennett, mental life, like any other natural phenomenon, can become a topic for scientific investigation. And yet, the scientific investigation of mind encounters a number of uniquely philosophical problems. For starters, while few of us could tell a quark from a gluon, or explain the difference between acetylcholine and dopamine, almost all of us believe we possess some acquaintance with minds. At the very least, we believe that we know our own minds with an unusual degree of intimacy and certainty. As it turns out, our confidence rests on rather shaky grounds. As we shall see, it is possible to show that most of what we say and think about minds is, by the very strictest scientific and logical standards, false. And yet, it seems crazy to deny the truth of a large portion of our folk psychological statements. Crazy or not, many scientists and philosophers have denied that our talk of things like belief and desire can make any real scientific sense.

While denying that we have beliefs and desires might seem far-fetched, it is worth considering whether our confidence in the usual ways we speak and write about the mind is appropriate. Do we really know what we are talking about when we talk about the mind? There are reasons to believe that we do not. While we have reasonably well-defined ways of characterizing or identifying the meaning of terms like *electron*, *shoe* or *egg* folk psychological notions like *belief*, *desire*, *thought*, and *mind* are far more difficult to determine.

