

Patterns and Stances

As we have seen, careful consideration of psychological terms soon reveals their peculiar status. While we are almost certain that things like beliefs and desires are real, we are unsure how they exist, or what it means to say that sentences about beliefs are true or false. The problematic status of psychological phenomena, along with the logical difficulties described in the previous chapter, led many psychologists and philosophers to recommend that we ignore folk psychology in favor of the empirically respectable results of the natural sciences. It is difficult to imagine doing without the terms of commonsense psychology, but this is precisely what some important philosophers and scientists have recommended.

In order to avoid what they see as pernicious mentalism, prominent naturalists like Quine and Churchland have argued that we should ignore most of our commonsense beliefs about minds and focus instead on the evidence provided by neuroscience and the study of behavior. The tension that results from needing to talk about the mind and not knowing what it means to talk about the mind forms the core problem that Dennett's philosophy is designed to overcome.

Puzzling questions confront us when we try to remain faithful to both commonsense and the strictest standards of scientific truth: How can we be wrong about the idea that people's actions are caused by their beliefs? Surely it makes little sense to *believe* that there are no beliefs? Furthermore, it is difficult to understand what it would mean to judge whether eliminativism is true, since without intentional notions like belief, it seems unlikely that we could continue to speak meaningfully of truth and falsity. Dennett's philosophical work is

devoted, in large part to showing why our ordinary conceptions of mind are both completely reasonable and adequate for most ordinary purposes, and yet, in some more basic sense, incorrect. He explains how we are all simultaneously virtuosos and idiots when it comes to matters of the mind.

To explain how this can be the case, Dennett turns to Darwin. According to Dennett, the words we use to describe mental life are part of a strategy that has evolved for predicting the behaviors of animals and people that are relevant to us. Animals, especially those that live in social groups, must constantly monitor and anticipate the behavior of their fellows. It is important for each to have a reliable way of determining the behavior of its partners in social activity, its prey, potential predators, etc. In our own lives we manage to predict and explain the behavior of other people and animals with relatively high levels of success. We see similar levels of success in the behavior of other species.

It's sometimes tempting to assume that when we manage to make a correct interpretation of the beliefs and desires of an organism it's as though we are able to look inside its mind so as to uncover the truth about the processes and mechanisms at work inside the mind/brain. While this intuition is central to the work of philosophers like Jerry Fodor, (1975) Dennett sees matters differently. For Dennett, when we take the intentional stance towards something or someone, we project the virtual world of beliefs and desires onto the other person or animal in somewhat the same way a geographer might project lines of latitude and longitude onto the Earth's surface. In both cases, the projections permit us a means of manipulating the objects in questions and in both cases the question of whether these virtual objects *really exist* is misguided. Dennett's approach accounts for the ability of animals to make reliable predictions about the behavior of others given their complete ignorance of the biological mechanisms that govern behavior. Since we ordinarily have no access to the internal mechanisms governing the behavior of our fellow creatures, we must adopt what Dennett calls the *intentional stance* towards them. The intentional stance is a strategy that begins with the assumption that other animals believe what they should believe given their perceptions and desire what they should desire given their needs. This is what Dennett calls the assumption of optimal design. We assume that other animals (including people) tend to pursue outcomes that serve their interests and that they have been equipped, by natural selection with suitable perceptual and cognitive capacities to manipulate their environments appropriately. Ascriptions of beliefs and desire are often objectively

