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Compositionality, Concepts and Representations II: New Problems in Cognitive Science

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D. Dennett's brand of anti-representationalism: a key to philosophical issues of cognitive science

Sofia Miguens

Abstract:
Although D. Dennett is sometimes accused of insensitivity to 'real', first-person problems of the mind, his Intentional Systems Theory offers a comprehensive, cognitive science grounded, account of the nature of subjectivity. This account involves views on intentionality (concerning the nature of the representation relation, content, psychological explanation), consciousness (comprising a functionalist model, a second order, belief-like, theory of self-awareness, and a deflationary view of qualia), personhood and freedom of action (concerning what must be in place in terms of cognition for the mentalistic concepts of 'person' and 'action' to apply). Since Dennett defends that the principles for understanding intentionality and consciousness are the same, in order to understand his brand of anti-representationalism we must deal with both intentionality and consciousness. That is what I will do in this article. I will also discuss the metaphysical implications of anti-representationalism, and in general use Dennett's work as a key to describe how a range of philosophical issues of cognitive science appear from an anti-representationalist point of view.

> "There are two major traditions in modern theorizing about the mind, one that we will call representationalist, and one that we'll call eliminativist. Representationalists hold that postulating representational states is essential to the theory of cognition (…) Eliminativists, by contrast, think that psychological theories can dispense with such semantic notions as representation. According to eliminativists the appropriate vocabulary for psychological theorizing is neurological or perhaps behavioral"
> Fodor & Pylyshyn 1988, Conexionism and cognitive architecture, *Cognition*, 38.

1. Cognitive science, mind and method

Cognitive science research bears on our understanding of fundamental questions about the mind, such as the nature of representation, consciousness and

action. Drawing on such research D. Dennett's work of the last thirty five years offers proposals about how to think about each of these issues. His views are admittedly controversial – he tends to be accused of insensitivity to the 'real', first-person, problems of the mind[1], but in fact he provides a comprehensive, cognitive science grounded, account of the nature of subjectivity.

For Dennett intentionality, and not consciousness, is the most basic issue about the mind[2], and the notion of interpreter is essential to deal with it (Dennett 1987). His theory of consciousness involves a critique of *qualia* and the Cartesian Theater, but also positive views, namely a funcionalist model aimed at explaining the status of the centredness, seriality and continuity of mental life and a belief-like, second-order, account of self-awareness (Dennett 1991). It is from views on intentionality and consciousness – which will be explored in this article – that a practical philosophy arises, concerning what must be in place in terms of cognition for the mentalistic concepts of 'person' and 'action' to apply to cognitive systems (Dennett 1983, Dennett 2003).

Anti-representationalism is the core of Dennett's view of the mind. Anti-representationalism is the idea according to which for there to be mind there need be no such thing as real inner representations in those physical systems we take to be rational agents. For Dennett this means that there's no such thing as representations short of a stance, a strategy towards certain physical systems. Many people consider these formulation already unintelligible, or question begging[3]. Critics in general took it as *interpretivism* (i.e. mind would depend on a merely *instrumental* attribution of mentality by an interpreter). In fact, in order to fully understand Dennett's brand of anti-representationalism we must see it as a more sophisticated view, including (i) the idea that mentalistic notions aplly to agents globally considered and not to inner states, (ii) the fact that they apply depends on recognition of patterns of behaviour and also on agents inner design for recognition (which means questions of representation

1 Cf. for instance Nagel 1995, for his reviews of Dennett 1969 and Dennett 1991.

2 Unlike many philosophers of mind (such as D. Chalmers, T. Nagel, or J. Searle) Dennett rejects the ideia that consciousness is *the* fundamental problem about the mind: consciousness is a kind of representation, there's no such thing as 'phenomenal consciousness' as an extra property of the world. Dualism aside, this can be seen as a leibnizian conviction about the continuity of awareness and self-awareness, as opposed to the Cartesian ideia of an absolute character of consciousness.

3 Whether it is dependent on an evolutionary or a transcendental argument (Fodor & Lepore 1992, 154).

and design should come together in the theory of mind[4]), (iii) a position about the metaphysics of cognition, which involves taking seriously the difference between vehicles of representation (e.g. neural events) and *what is represented*. The whole view may arguably push Dennett into denying metaphysical realism (Haugeland 1997: 267-304) but it is certainly not instrumentalist.

Before addressing Dennett's general positions I want to point out something that may help a reader navigate through his work. Given his dislike of tempting subjects such as *qualia* and *zombies*, and also his dislike of overlinguistified and overargued approaches to questions of mind, Dennett sometimes seems to be very far from protocols of argument in philosophy, not so much a philosophers' philosopher as a philosopher for those outside of the discipline who are interested in philosophical issues. He casts a suspicious look on some ongoing debates in the philosophy of mind and often goes straight to cognitive science work[5]. This is on the one hand a symptom of what Dennett calls his technophile inclinations – in his own words, if not for being born into a arts and humanities academic family he would probably have become an engineer (*Self-Portrait*[6])-, but we may also see it as a quinean, naturalized epistemology, imperative put to practice in terms of method, disrupting supposed boundaries between what should be scientific and what should be philosophic in the theory of mind. In consequence, Dennett's work often takes the form of an effort to relate cognitive science with phenomenological descriptions of mind (taking *phenomenology* to mean a neutral description of mental goings-on, at the personal level, the level we access our own minds[7]). Bringing together this phenomenological take a cognitive system may have of itself with a third-person approach involves specific problems: cognitive science is involved in what Dennett calls (Dennett 1991) the dismantling of the witness protection program or a close-up of the observer. There's no witness, no observer inside a cognitive system which we take to be mental (ourselves included, of course) and still there's mind.

Yet, although taking cognitive science seriously involves trying to find out whether self-knowledge can be disrupted from a third-person point of view, this may in fact go together with the impossibility of being an eliminativist.

4 Naturally, this ended up focusing Dennett's interests on Darwinism (Dennett 1995).

5 Artificial Intelligence namely (e.g. the work of people such as A. Newell, M. Minsky, H. Simon), is abundantly referred and explicitly considered as a source of inspiration.

6 Dennett 1998, 356.

7 When we describe ourselves from within what we are doing is not forging hypothesis about the brain but rather phenomenology, in this sense.

And that is exactly the case with Dennett. Anyway if we consider that self-knowledge stops – it goes only as far as the mind goes, or rather, not even that far, and definitely does not reach cognitive architecture or physical workings – Dennett's decision not to separate philosophical theory of mind from third-person approaches to cognition doesn't seem such a bad one.

2. A few remarks about the origins of Intentional Systems Theory

Since Dennett's anti-representationalism results from what was going on in philosophy in the 50s and 60s, I will take a step back to reformulate the question about Dennett's anti-representationalism as a question about what makes for an antirepresentationalist such as Dennett. In epistemological and ontological questions, Dennett's work was inspired by ideas of Ryle, Wittgenstein, Quine and Putnam. Ryle showed him that the alternative between materialist and idealist monism depended on an incorrect approach to the problem of mind[8], and Wittgenstein the groundlessness of any presumption of epistemic authority or direct access to the structure of the world in mental descriptions[9]. Wittgenstein and Ryle together provided an example of how description of mind at the personal level should go, and of how talk of mind should be taken, if not as authoritative introspective description of thinking substances. From Quine, Dennett took the naturalist outlook and the regard for natural science, and also (as Fodor put it) nihilism about meaning – the idea that 'there are no semantic engines'. Putnam's functionalism, a sophisticated kind of materialism, allowed him to articulate his opposition to psychophysical identity theory and gave him the idea of the mental as incorrigibility of personal level acess. His

8 An approach which assumed the disjunction 'either there are minds, or there are bodies', before asking which is reducible to which.

9 Also the problem of the limit of mentalistic descriptions: for instance I say '2+2 =4' / 'How do you do that?' / 'I don't know, I just know it'; still, the fact that the subject cannot answer the question doesn't imply it can't be answered. The story of Dennett and Wittgenstein is an interesting one: Dennett ended up in Oxford, where Ryle 'had been king', for his PhD, but he had actually set out to England in search of his philosophical hero, Wittgenstein. Yet, the way philosophy was practiced by self-professed wittgensteinians displeased him, mainly because it meant taking the legitimate difference between personal and subpersonal levels approaches to mind as an excuse not to care about subpersonal level questions. So Dennett «quit trying to be a wittgenteinian and simply took what he thought he learned from the *Philosophical Investigations*, trying to put it to work» (Dennett 1998, 365).

thinking about action was influenced by Ch. Taylor's philosophical critique of psychological behaviourism, as an utopian search of a pure data language to explain behaviour, as well as by E. Anscombe's analysis of intentional action in *Intention*.

The starting point for the theory of mind is thus 'phenomenology', and that's what Wittgenstein (in the *Philosophical Investigations)* and Ryle (in *The Concept of Mind)* do: a report of mental happennings, whether these be feelings of pain or mathematical thoughts, without any presumption of explanation, or inquiry about physical basis of mind. Strangely enough, these philosophers, on whose work Dennett molds his own, are often taken as behaviorists. Yet, behaviourism, Skinner type of behaviourism, was exactly what stood opposed to the methodological revolution in psychology which prompted Dennett's philosophy, and which we can loosely call cognitivism, in the sense of informational-computational approach to the mind. Dennett has always opposed what he called 'peripherist behaviorism' and defended the indispensable role of intentional and teleological descriptions of behaviour – initially he called this position centralism (Dennett 1969), later Intentional Stance (Dennett 1987)[10]. Psychological and philosophical behaviorism have always been rather different anyway, and it is philosophical behaviorists Dennett takes as models. But there's one point where Dennett profoundly disagrees with a rylean-wittgensteinian approach to the mind: the ideia that a self-sufficient conceptual analysis could be a proper philosophical method, which easily pairs up with contempt for natural science[11]. What's important about Wittgenstein and Ryle is the fact that they try to conceive the *status of the personal level* – the level at which we describe our minds from within, and where pulleys and levers questions, i.e. mechanical considerations, are not legitimate. Such personal/subpersonal distinction is vital, when dealing with mind and cognition, to set apart what is descriptive and what is explanatory. Still, even if personal level approach should consist of phenomenological data-gathering for the theory of mind, this should be brought together with scientific research about cognition. Luckily, to help him step past the lack of interest in the philosophical bearing of science, he had brought from America the influence of Quine, and

10 In fact, this hides a deeper behaviourist commitment: Dennett thinks behaviourist principles should be apllied to the inside of the brain and not the whole organism ('the skin is not such an important frontier') and translate into evolution by natural selection (Dennett 1978, Dennett 1995).

11 And, in the cases of Ryle and Wittgenstein, also for questions which excite philosophers of mind nowadays, such as physicalism.

the imperative, for a proper quinean, not to overlook science[12]. This led Dennett to a hybrid philosophy / cognitive science style of approach, which sets him equally apart both from Ryle and Wittgestein conceptual analysis as from much contemporary philosophy of mind.

Putnam's functionalism came as a final touch. In his manifests from the 60s[13], Putnam declared the mind-body problem to be not an empirical problem but a logical, linguistic one, with nothing to do with a supposedly unique character of human subjective experience, since it would arise for any system characterized by an assimetry of access to its own physical and functional (logical) states. So from Putnam, Dennett took not only functionalism as a critique of identity theory but also a characterization of mind as incorrigible self-access to functional states[14].

The result is Intentional Systems Theory (IST henceforth): a moderate realism about the nature of representation (Dennett 1998, 95), going together with a teleofunctionalist view of content and the refusal to consider psychological explanation as explanation properly speaking. As for consciousness, the theory includes a deflationary view of (so called) *qualia*, and a second-order, belief-like, account of awareness, based on a functionalist model – the Multiple Drafts Model (Dennett 1991). Dennett's gradualist position about 'persons' and 'actions' (Dennett 1983, Dennett 2003) comes of these.

3. Representation: sententialism, eliminativism or interpretation

But what is anti-representationalism, if not straight Churchland-style eliminativism? In IST's case it results from (i) a quinean option for interpretation in the theory of mind (ultimatelly explored through the idea of real patterns

12 Cf. *Self-Portrait* «What do you get when you cross a Ryle with a Quine? A Dennett, apparently». (Dennett 1998, 365). From Quine Dennett also took the ideia that a science of intention is not possible: for him – and he's not alone here – history of contemporary philosophy of mind starts with Quine's famous paragraph (§45) of *Word and Object* (1960) about the impossibility of a science of intention.

13 Such as *Minds and Machines* from 1960 and *The Nature of Mental States* from 1967.

14 Later, he also admitted to the influence of R. Rorty's papers from the 70s, where Rorty defended that what makes something mental is not the fact that it explains behavior or the fact that it is, or is not, a property of a physical entity, but the fact that certain reports about it have a certain status of incorrigibility. Rorty stressed then that incorrigibility is not infallibility: reports by a cognitive system about what goes on in it may well be wrong, still knowledge-claims cannot be overridden.