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Dennett's Intentional Strategy Applied to Animals

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Abstract

Daniel Dennett lays out what he calls the intentional strategy (or stance) and the intentional system, which proposes that we could predict the behavior of humans, non-human animals, plants or in other words, what he calls an intentional system. Roughly speaking, the intentional strategy involves attributing beliefs and desires, that a reason using object ought to have given the circumstances, to an object; with those beliefs and desires, one should be able to predict the object's behavior. Though my goal is not to criticize Dennett's view, I will argue that the intentional strategy works better on non-human animals than humans; a mere observation of an application of the intentional strategy. Once I have shown that the intentional strategy seems to work better on non-human animals than humans, I will argue that it is because it is in the nature of animals to make survival their highest desire and then form beliefs to secure this desire. Humans, on the other hand, form beliefs about the world, and these beliefs form their desires; they are not simply seeking survival.

In *True Believers: The Intentional Strategy* Dennett lays out what he calls the intentional strategy (or stance) and the intentional system, which proposes that we could predict the behavior of humans, non-human animals, computer, plants or in other words, what he calls an intentional system. Though my goal is not to criticize Dennett's view, I will argue that the intentional strategy works better on non-human animals than humans; a mere observation of an application of the intentional strategy. The bulk of my argument will show that the intentional strategy works better for non-human animals than humans. Then I will explain why non-human animals fit the intentional strategy better than humans. For the sake of my paper, 'animals' refer to non-human animals.

I.

The intentional strategy is a strategy used to predict the behavior of an intentional system. An intentional system is a system in which the intentional strategy works. It seems like a circular argument (and it is in a sense), but in simpler terms, if the

intentional strategy works on X, then X is an intentional system. Dennett says that a person can predict the behavior of an ‘intentional system’ by using the ‘intentional strategy’. Although he admits that this process does not work *all* the time, he still believes it is worth understanding and accepting because it works *most* of the time.

There are four steps to the intentional strategy. First, whatever the intentional strategy is being used on must be treated as an ideally rational object, a reason-using object. Second, one must figure out what beliefs that rational object should have given the circumstances of its existence. Third, given the same circumstances, one must figure out the desires of this rational object. And finally, by this point, it should be predictable how this rational object will behave.

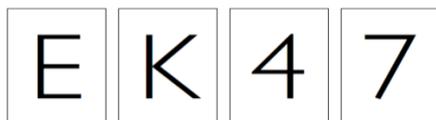
A simple example to show how the intentional strategy works: My sister Rachael and I were getting ready to go to sleep the other night, and she made a comment that made me laugh. She said “Although I don’t want any, it is always nice to know that the house is going to smell like coffee in the morning. It is a nice smell to wake up to.” I did in fact make coffee the next morning, but how did she know that? Rachael used the intentional strategy to predict my behavior in the morning. She first assumed (at least I hope she assumed) that I am a rational agent. She knows that I believe coffee will wake me up, and she also knows that I desire coffee in the morning. Assuming I am a rational agent, knowing that I believe coffee will wake me up and knowing my desire for coffee in the morning led Rachael to predict that I was going to make coffee in the morning.

Stephen Stich does not buy into this strategy, because it does not give any account for creatures that act irrationally. He thinks the intentional strategy fails to say a good amount about the mental states of common people. By accepting the intentional strategy, we lose knowing a great deal about how common people think and act. In a response to Dennett, he says, “If we accept Dennett’s trade, we will have no coherent way to describe our cognitive shortcomings nor the process by which we may learn to overcome them” (1981,47). Stich’s examples of humans acting irrationally strengthen my argument that the intentional strategy works better on non-human things. He uses beliefs as an example; people should be treated as a reason using, ideally rational objects; however people often hold irrational beliefs. He says, “People, by contrast, are not ideally rational, and therein lies a devastating problem for Dennett...Presumably no system ought to hold contradictory beliefs, and all systems ought to believe all the logical truths, along with all the logical consequences of what they believe” (1981,48). Stich is talking about what we ought to believe, rather than what we do believe. But people do not believe, and often do not even realize, all logical consequences of their beliefs.

In a later paper, also replying to Dennett’s intentional strategy, Stich brings up the “selection task” done by P.C. Wason and P.N. Johnson-Laird. The selection task is a

thought experiment that requires basic use of logic to derive the correct answer. A group of people was asked to solve the puzzle, and the majority of the recipients got the answer wrong. This study showed that “human reasoning often deviates substantially from the standard provided by normative canons of inference” (Stich, 1985, 120).

Here is the selection task, and the results that came from it.



RULE: If it has a vowel on one side, it has an even number on the other.

Subjects were asked what card/s needed to be turned over to discover the truth of the rule.

The answer: You would have to pull E and 7. If you turn over the card with the letter E on it, and there is an odd number, the rule is false since there has to be an even number with a vowel. Similarly, if you turn over the card with the number 7 on it, and there is a vowel, then the rule is false. But you would not have to turn over the cards with the letter K or number 4 on it. Since the rule puts a necessary condition on vowels, the rule does not apply to the card with the letter K. The same idea goes for the card with the number 4 on it. The rule puts a sufficient condition on even numbers. Since 4 is an even number, there's no way for the rule to be false. If the other side is a consonant, it still does not break the rule for the same reason you would not have to pull the card with the letter K on it.

While some of the subjects were very intelligent subjects (1985,117), most people got the answer wrong. Out of 128 university students, only five got the right answer. There were two answers that were most common among the subjects: First, the card with the letter E and the number 4 should be turned over. The second most common answer was only the card with the letter E should be turned over.

Stich shows that although a system ought to believe all logical truths, people, in particular, do not. People do not believe all the logical consequences of their beliefs, nor do they act rationally all the time. It's clear that people do not believe what they ought to believe (remember that Dennett requires the object be attributed beliefs it ought to have). Stich says, “It simply makes no sense to attribute inferential failings or inconsistent beliefs to an ideally rational system” (1985,48). In the case of the selection task, subjects ought to believe that the cards with the letter E and the number 7 should be turned over, but they do not. Going back to my coffee example, if Rachael had

attributed inferential failings or inconsistent beliefs to me, there would be a higher chance of inaccurately predicting my morning pot of coffee.

II.

Stich's reply to Dennett shows that the intentional strategy does not work for cases of irrationality; it shows that there are problems with the intentional strategy. Sometimes the intentional strategy does not work. While Dennett recognizes that it does not work all the time, it's interesting to notice that most of the problems that turn up with the intentional strategy are problems with the intentional strategy applied to humans. Dennett admits, "In cases of even the mildest and most familiar cognitive pathology—where people seem to hold contradictory beliefs, or to be deceiving themselves, for instance—the canons of interpretation of the intentional strategy fail to yield clear, stable verdicts about which beliefs and desires to attribute to a person" (1981a, 67). Keep in mind that Dennett thinks the intentional strategy should be accepted because it works most of the time. However, it's clear that he recognizes the problems that arise from it.

The best argument Dennett has against Stich is an argument from natural selection. He claims, "...that if an organism is the product of natural selection we can assume that most of its beliefs will be true, and most of its belief-forming strategies will be rational" (1981b, 75). Dennett explains that organism necessarily evolve into true belief forming creatures from natural selection. This enables organisms to survive and live in their environment.

Although animals, too, produce counter examples to the intentional strategy, animals are different from humans because even when animals hold false beliefs, usually their actions are still predictable. It is very easy to attribute beliefs and desires to animals. A rabbit will run away from noise in the leaves, regardless of what caused the noise, because it is safer to run away than to stay. This is something that rabbits do out of instinct. Rabbits evolved into this fearful creature. The rabbit believes there is danger, but if the wind caused shuffle in the leaves, then the rabbit has a false belief.

Animals have false beliefs just like humans do, and they may have just as many, but the difference is that it is still easy to predict the behavior of non-human animals. Thus, I can attribute a belief to the rabbit, it believes there is danger. I can attribute desire to the rabbit; it desires to survive. And I can use its belief and desire to predict its behavior; it will run away. Even when animals hold false beliefs, the intentional strategy works.

Now replace the rabbit with a human. A human hears a noise in the leaves and runs away. There is nothing else happening around this human. It is safe to assume in this

example that the human clearly ran away from the noise in the leaves. Can I attribute a belief or a desire to the human to explain its action? No, not any that would really make sense. In some cases, there are too many possible combinations of beliefs and desires you could attribute to humans. It's far from obvious what beliefs and desires you should attribute to the human. What belief and desire would make sense of this scenario? It's not clear why anyone would suddenly run away from the noise in the leaves. Although you could "hypothetically" attribute some beliefs and desires to the human, you would be scrambling for beliefs and desires to make the person fit into the intentional strategy. To be a true believer, the intentional strategy should work well to predict the behavior of the object. It's pretty clear that it is far easier to attribute beliefs and desires to animals than humans simply because animals are simple-minded creatures.

III.

So far, I have shown that the intentional strategy seems to work better on animals than humans. However, this raises the question *why* it is easier to attribute beliefs and desires to animals than humans. The question now is "What makes humans more complex systems than animals?" The answer lies in the nature of humans and animals. It is in the nature of animals to make survival their highest desire and then form beliefs to secure this desire. The case is different for humans. It is in the nature of humans to do things such as finding meaning in life, finding things they are passionate about, and going after projects bigger than themselves. They form beliefs about the world, and these beliefs form their desires; they are not simply seeking survival.

Humans derive a lot of desires from beliefs. I desire coffee in the morning because I believe it will wake me up. I do not believe coffee will wake me up because I desire it. I have to form a belief about coffee to desire it. Sometimes, I think, even the desire to survive is derived from beliefs. Some humans desire to survive because they believe they can do something with their life. Or they desire to survive because of their fear, or belief, of death. I do not mean that *all* desires are derived from beliefs, just a lot of them. It's clear that humans still have survival instincts, and that does not seem to be derived from any belief.

Animals, though, derive beliefs from their desires. When attributing beliefs and desires to an animal, it seems to me that determining the animal's desire must come before determining its belief. I cannot attribute the belief that there is danger to the rabbit before I attribute the desire to survive to it. Since the rabbit desires to survive, it will form beliefs to fulfill that desire. It does not make sense to say that the rabbit formed the desire to survive because it had a belief that there was danger. Rather, it makes more sense to say that the rabbit formed the belief that there was danger because it had the natural, instinctive desire to survive. The rabbit will form any belief to secure its desire to survive.

Although the rabbit holds a false belief, running away from the noise is the most rational thing the rabbit can do. The rabbit does not take into consideration that maybe the wind caused a shuffle in the leaves, or that a smaller non-harmful creature could be lurking in the leaves. It is the nature of an animal to be safe than sorry.

This is what makes animals more simple minded than humans. Animals have only one main desire, and that is to survive. One might say that animals desire to eat and sleep, but animals eat and sleep to survive. Animals desire to survive, so it forms the beliefs that it needs to find food, make shelter, eat, sleep, etc. When applying the intentional strategy to animals, all that is needed is the belief that that animal ought to have in its circumstance to secure its survival.

Humans are bit more difficult since they derive a lot of their desires from their beliefs, and the way in which they derive their beliefs and desires is much more complex than animals. While it's true that humans desire to survive alongside animals, they gain that desire in a much different way than animals. Although there is a strong instinct in humans to survive, sometimes still, humans derive their desire to survive from a belief. Some humans desire to live because they believe that they only have one life to live, and there is nothing after death. Others desire to live because they believe the more good they do in 'this' lifetime, the better their afterlife will be. Thus it is hard to predict how the human will behave because, say for this example, the former might consider less what is morally right or wrong while the latter will heavily consider what is morally right or wrong,

IV.

Daniel Dennett claims that we can attribute beliefs and desires to an intentional system and predict its behavior via the intentional strategy. I think that it is interesting that animals can hold false beliefs, yet the intentional strategy still works well to predict their behavior. What's more interesting is that they can hold false beliefs and still make rational decisions. The intentional strategy works better on animals than humans because due to the simple mind of an animal, it is easier to attribute beliefs and desires to them. The reason it is easier to attribute beliefs and desires to animals is in the nature of animals; their beliefs are formed to secure their desire to survive.

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