

Dennett “How to Change Your Mind”

1. Change of Mind

Annette’s Baier’s Question: We speaking of “changing our minds” on a subject. What is involved in this phenomenon?

A subsidiary question: Can the other animals change their minds?

It cannot be denies that these animals learn things insofar as they acquire new information and act on it. I guess the alternative here is that their minds are changed for them by perceived changes in their environments.

Malcolm’s Thesis: The other animals do not think, ruminate, contemplate things, etc. They do not think in an occurrent fashion. But we can ascribe them thoughts as standing states of mind. The dog thinks that his master is home but is not thinking “my master is home.”

Dennett: Malcolm is on the right track. Baier provides arguments or considerations that help improve the thesis.

Some cognitive changes are not changes in mind. Dennett’s example: coming to know turtles can’t fly through the air.

2. Dennett on Desire

Dennett reflects on his transition from a de dicto desire for a boat to a de re desire for this particular boat. The initial desire has some content beyond the specification here given. When he says he wants a boat he doesn’t mean a canoe with a hole in it. He is referring to or alluding to or holding fixed a vague set of criteria that would satisfy his desire for a boat.

An intuitive limit on extensional equivalence: If D wants a boat that is F, G, H etc and x is the only boat that is F, G, H etc., it does not follow that D wants x. D may not know that x is F, G, H etc.

Does it follow from the fact that D wants a boat that is F, G, H etc that D will want x when he learns that it is F, G, H etc.? Dennett says no. This is not even “incoherent” or “logically odd.” The subject’s hesitation “May in fact be a highly useful and adaptive feature of my cognitive make up” (302).

Stronger limit still: “Even if the yacht he then presents me with is exactly what I had in mind, even if when I examine it I can find no disqualifying features, there is still a motion of the mind that must happen, and this is just what the broker tries so resourcefully to evoke in me” (302).

Dennett's Initial Thesis: The de re "desire" for the particular boat in question is not best viewed as a desire or wanting but a choice.

Dennett's Second Thesis: The transition from de dicto desire to choice is a (cognitive) action. It is something the person does: i.e. choose. But it is something she does without knowing why she did it.

Question: Dennett says choosing or transitioning from de dicto to "de re desire" (which is not a desire at all but a "commitment to acquire") is something for which we can be held responsible (303). But how does this square with his saying we don't know what we're doing when we choose? Since Oedipus, we are thought to enjoy responsibility for an action only if we knew we were doing it under the description for which we are held responsible for it.

3. de Sousa on Belief

De Sousa's Initial Thesis: Judgment is neither a form of belief nor an act that brings belief in its wake. Instead, judgment yields *commitment* to the truth of a sentence but this is neither necessary nor sufficient for belief as it's a different kind of thing altogether.

Dennett's Amendment: Call such commitments "opinions." The other animals have beliefs (which he has yet to analyze) but they do not make judgments—they do not assent to some truths and demur from others—and so do not have opinions. Changing your mind is forming a (new) opinion. So the other animals don't change their minds.

de Sousa's Second Thesis: We cannot or should not analyze degrees of belief in terms of outright belief; nor should we analyze outright belief in terms of some degree of belief (in context) as is more commonly done. Instead there are two separate kinds of state denoted by "belief" one of which admits of belief and the other of which does not.

De Sousa's Third Thesis: Degrees of belief are aptly modeled with probabilities. They together with our desires or preferences explain our behavior as an attempt to maximize expected utility (as determined by our preferences and credences or degrees of belief).

De Sousa's Fourth Thesis: One kind of action explained by our beliefs and preferences is our judgments or acts of assent. We assent to a sentence just in case doing so best promotes our utility, which incorporates a desire for truth in assertion or assent.

Dennett and De Sousa argue that we do not have first-person access to our degrees of belief and preferences only to our opinions and commitments to acquire: the linguistic or discursive all or nothing states we don't share with the other animals. On this basis Dennett rejects the idea that a normative epistemology could provide us with an "ethics of belief" or rules we could use to better apportion our beliefs to new evidence, etc.

Dennett on akrasia: The akratic smoker accepts that smoking causes cancer, she shares this opinion, but she doesn't believe it.