ROBOT METAPHYSICS

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Strong nominalism can be defined as any theory of names and of naming which identifies the word with the token--that is that identifies the word with sounds or any other piece of straightforward physical reality such as the ink marks on paper or circuitry in computers or in brains. All of us philosophers and non-philosophers alike say things which imply strong nominalism. If advanced forms of AI, i.e., robot metaphysicians ever "do metaphysics" it will be done as strong nominalism. I wonder if AI experts or even very capable amateurs[1] who happen to have philosophical interests will not tend to be particularly susceptible to this philosophically anti-*nomian* position.

Consider Daniel Dennett. A most engaging writer. Not the least of his virtues is that he pounds his enemies with silken gloves. Whether he is bashing Skinner in "Skinner Skinned" or referring to metaphysical disputes about the mind-body problem as the "familiar brawl," his brashness fails to offend. I do not say this because I am sympathetic to his views or because I take perverse delight in the efficacy with which he demolishes some of my own *betes noirs* such as behaviorists. In fact I am probably irremediably at odds with what is obviously his own metaphysics of mind, for by his own avowal he is an unabashed physicalist. Or is he?

Dennett is not at all opposed to mentalism, he says. He believes that intentional and mechanistic explanations can co-exist. On an Aristotelian conception of man (or what comes to the same thing regarding this issue, on an existential view of man as we find it for example in Merleau-Ponty) intentional and mechanistic explanations of human activity not only can but must co-exist otherwise the human being and all its intentionalities would be something distinct from the body. In other words, there already is an ancient and persistent metaphysics of mind which views the human being and his activity as simultaneously physical and mental.

Dennett, then, is in venerable philosophical company when discussing human beings, however remote he is from that company when discussing machines. I wish first to show that one of his reasons for being in that venerable company is mind bogglingly superficial, and the outcome of the most transparent instance of strong nominalistic metaphysics as one is likely to find. Then I

will examine some points in his essay "Where Am I" to show that he is perhaps not too genuinely interested in the philosophy of mind at all. Or perhaps that his not fully resolved doubts about physicalism remain a painful irritant that he is tempted to banish into the realm of hopeless antiquarian conundrum.

Dennett observes that for Skinner neither the pre-scientific, i.e., intentional view of a person's behavior; nor the scientific, i.e., mechanistic or physicalistic view of human behavior can be proved. "But," Dennett quotes Skinner "it is in the nature of scientific inquiry that the evidence should shift in favor of the second." Dennett agrees that ultimate appeals to intentional idioms must disappear as progress is made in scientific explanations but he is at odds with Skinner's bolder view that as this occurs "intentional explanations will be rendered false, not reduced or translated into other terms."[2]

Dennett says he can give examples of where both mechanistic and intentional explanations can co-exist. These are not hard to come by. According to Dennett what the computer programmer can do if we give him the chance is to *explain how* computers can multiply, add, divide, guide rockets to the moon, make out paychecks and beat humans at chess. The computer programmer cannot *explain* away *an alleged illusion* that computers do these things, for they in fact *do* these things.

However easy it is to "find examples" it is hard to see how the examples do anything more than beg the question. Let me quote from "Skinner Skinned." "We know that there is a purely mechanistic explanation of the chess playing computer, and yet it is *not false* to say that the computer *figures out,* or *recognizes* the best move, or that it *concludes* that its opponent cannot make a certain move, any more than it is false to say that a computer adds or multiplies." (Italics his) That is it. That is the example supposed to show that mechanistic and intentional explanations can co-exist.

What should be in question is the propriety of attributing intentional performances to the computer regardless of what we are tempted to say or in fact do say. But Dennett does not discuss this here. There is simply an example of what is presumably a plain truth, that is that computers do what we say they do, and we say that they do things that are intentional.

If it were not for the insightfulness, clarity and philosophical sophistication shown elsewhere by Dennett this could all be dismissed as a mistake or oversight. But he offers it in all seriousness, and it perplexes me.

I hesitate to say anything more about this for it seems to me that it will be to belabor the obvious. If computers do not perform intentional activity then it is *false to say* that they do regardless of how convenient it may be to speak this way, regardless of how common it is to speak this way, even regardless of the most

intricate, far reaching, and powerful arguments that might be marshalled to say they do. For if in fact computers are not intentional beings, then no argument can or ever could prove that they are. And absolutely no headway is made in intelligent argument towards establishing that intentional and mechanistic explanations can co-exist, by repeating that computers do what we all admittedly have a tendency to say they do.

Since even specialists in electromagnetism would be somewhat in the dark as to what is really going on in computers, or brains or in the space between the earth and the sun for that matter, I suspect that part of our willingness to even entertain the notion that computers think at all derives from our almost bottomless ignorance about the nature of this elusive force which operates in computers as well as brains.

But the exceedingly superficial *tendency for us to speak* as if computers think is another matter. For this tendency to ascribe intentional predicates to all use objects and especially machines and their activities, is well nigh universal and is a tendency which is no different basically from giving names to ships as sailors do speaking of them as females. Naturally some machines do extraordinary things. We still don't say that radios talk, but we do say that if we want to hear Beethoven's 9th Symphony, or Bertrand Russell's philosophical discourses we can buy them, for they are on tape.

Our tendency to say that computers add, divide, etc. is on a par with all of this and should have no metaphysical significance whatever. However, if a computer could add or subtract or multiply or divide in the sense in which we do these activities when we do them then the computer would certainly be performing high grade mental activity. At the risk of belaboring the obvious even further, though metaphysics being what it is today perhaps this is where the action is, let us see where accepting the claim that machines add, and multiply takes us.

Not only was it popular at one time, but it still is popular, to say that an odometer *measures* the miles the car has been driven, or that it *counts* the miles, that it *keeps a running record* of how many miles the automobile has travelled since it was put in action provided the odometer has not been tampered with or failed. It never occurs to anyone, however, to have a belief that *these* intentional terms "counting," "measuring," "keeping track of" establish intentionality in odometers. The main reason why we use these terms is due to our interaction with these devices. We have made the device so that we can measure and we gradually and naturally slip into saying that *the instrument* has done the job, that it has "measured" the distance. We don't always do this, of course. "The match started the fire, not the pyromaniac" is a joke.

Any mechanic who has the slightest interest in more than

merely repairing an odometer, knows that typically there is a cable running from one of the wheels of the vehicle to what is called "the counter" up in the dashboard. The designer of the odometer has figured out how many revolutions of the tire on the ground and how many revolutions of a system of cogged wheels will be the equivalent of a mile "registered" inside other cogged wheels which have numbers 1 through 0 printed on them. All numbered wheels begin at zero. When wheel one on the right moves one revolution it moves the wheel on the left only one notch so as to display the number 1. The odometer now tells me I have travelled ten miles. A clever device. I mean. . . humans are clever for having made such devices.

A computer program could be written to "*identify*" intentional terms, or rather could *simulate* what we do when we identify them. With appropriate instructions such as that terms predicated of the same entity whether human or mechanical can co-exist in the same entity, etc., it would undoubtedly certify the coherence of Dennett's essay. All that any of this should show is that computers are instruments. Can typewriters write philosophical essays? Mind did, but I remain adamant in my conviction that it is not only strange and improper use of language, but really, genuinely mistaken and in fact absurd to say that my typewriter can do philosophy, for it would be a mistake about what my typewriter *is*, a mistake about what it can do, a mistake about its being, a mistake in ontology. Every use object not only can but must be described in terms of intentionality otherwise we would not know what it is, for what it is can be understood only by understanding what it is for. The being of a use object, is its use. This is part of Heidegger's point in distinguishing between *Zuhandensein* and *Vorhandensein*. Of course human beings are capable of making supreme efforts and pragmatically speaking can turn human beings into instruments. Even the most incisive Aristotle mistook the human *praxis* of having slaves as establishing the instrumental character of these humans. And it is these same humans, with genuine intentionality, who can think up robot metaphysics, and they do by mistaking names for tokens, which is strong nominalism.

Historically nominalism and materialistic metaphysics have tended to be cozy bed partners. To the extent that Dennett's metaphysics is becoming respectable not to say *de rigeur* an ironic twist has been introduced. It is no longer anthromorphic much less animistic to ascribe mental predicates to mechanical devices. If the same rationale should apply to odometers we could also say that trees count the years they have been around, and carbon atoms count the ages, and the whole universe, though perhaps not filled with gods is filled with intentionality--shades of panpsychism right out of materialism.

Though materialism has been marginal to the so-called *philosophia perrenis* of the West, and has usually seemed to gain support from genuine and straight forward scientific advances. Now it is posed on the edge of a new and mighty surge in popularity as a consequence of another product of the capacity of human beings to understand and manage their world, namely computer technology.

Dennett openly proclaims his adherence to physicalism. But if we look attentively at his essay "Where Am I" we may wonder if he is really convinced. Here Dennett takes us on an exhilarating metaphysical science-fiction roller-coaster ride.

> Would I submit to a surgical procedure that would completely remove my brain, which would then be placed on a life support system at the Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston? Each input and output pathway, as it was severed, would be restored by a pair of micro-miniaturized radio transceivers, one attached precisely to the brain, the other to the nerve stumps in the empty cranium. No information would be lost, all the connectivity would be preserved. At first I was a bit reluctant. Would it really work: the Houston brain surgeons encouraged me. "Think of it," they said, "as a mere stretching of the nerves. If your brain were just moved over an inch in your skull, that would not alter or impair your mind. We're simply going to make the nerves indefinitely elastic by splicing radio links into them". . . .I agreed to give it a try . . . When I came out of anesthesia, I. . .asked the inevitable, the traditional, the lamentably hackneyed post-operative question: "Where am I?" The nurse smiled down at me. "You're in Houston," she said.[4]

Dennett's "bodily being" whom he later calls Hamlet, is led over to have a look at his brain. Shaken to his metaphysical presuppositional marrow, Dennett reports his honest and intuitive sense of what would in fact happen if such an almost miraculous operation could be performed.

> I thought to myself, well here I am sitting on a folding chair, staring through a piece of glass at my own brain. . . ."But wait," I said to myself, "shouldn't I have thought 'Here I am suspended in a bubbling fluid being stared at by my own

> eyes?' I tried to think this latter thought. I tried to project it into the tank offering it hopefully to my brain, but I failed to carry off the exercise with any conviction. I tried again. . .It wouldn't work. . .Being a philosopher of firm physicalist conviction I believed unswervingly that the tokening of my thoughts was occurring somewhere in my brain: yet, when I thought "Here I am" where the thought occurred to me was *here*, outside the vat where I Dennett (Hamlet) was standing staring at my brain.[5]

All of this by way of introducing the question "where am I" in what could be a metaphysically illuminating way. But instead of recognizing that "Where am I" can mean either "what are my spatial coordinates as a physical entity," and it can also mean something like "Where is this state-of-being-aware?" which may not have any meaning whatsoever, he proceeds to try to determine where he is with the presupposition that whatever the answer is it will be in terms of spatial coordinates. An existentialist might take advantage of this exciting imaginary quandary to point out that both "being here" and "being there" are existential structures constitutive of *Dasein*, and that spatial coordinates are derivative from that primordial *daseinsmassige* sense. An opaque being such as a rock or cauliflower is *here* or *there* in that derivative sense, and so is my body as a physical entity. It is because there is a primordial sense of "being here" that as Dennett puts it one can "mentally ostend a different place by observing that the sun is over there." "I found I had little difficulty," he says, "in getting my *there's* to hop all over the celestial map with proper references. I could loft a "there" in an instant through the farthest reaches of space, and then aim the next *"there"* with pinpoint accuracy at the upper left quadrant of a freckle on my arm."[6] These are feats of intentionality and they really do occur.

When Dennett speaks of "lofting his there's all over the celestial map with their proper references," he is setting his physicalistic predilections aside and speaking with the natural candor of one who is totally unfamiliar with any epistemological problems, of one who has placed all scientific and previous philosphical preconceptions in brackets in order to report what it is like to be a human being who looks at the stars.

Dennett does not consider the possibility that even under normal circumstances "where am I" if it means "where is my intentional being" has no clearly assignable sense, for it is like asking "how far is my dream from my pillow." "Where is my intentional being?" is exactly the same type of question which was debated in the middle ages in the form of "How many angels can

dance on the head of a pin?" This is supposed to be a paradigm of the type of nonsense that was discussed among the philosphers of that time. At least this is what non-metaphysicans have always liked to believe and have repeated until almost everyone now believes it. The question for the medieval philsopher was whether thoughts (or angels) could be said to exist if they had no physical location. Generally the anwer was that spatially locatable and spiritual entities were incommensurable. It was *better not to say* (today we would say it was misleading to say) that thoughts (or angels) were anywhere or nowhere since they were incorporeal. This was called hair splitting and evasion though we find essentially the same philosophical move made today by those who say that it would be a category mistake to attribute location to meanings. But the medievals thought that this was a consequence of the kinds of entities being examined and not because of something about propriety of language.

Dennett does not even glance at these issues through the corner of his eye, instead he makes a number of half-hearted and humorous attempts to decide where he is. He cavalierly dismisses the possiblity that Dennett cannot be where his body Hamlet is for if "Tom and Dick switch brains, Tom is the fellow with Dick's former body--just ask him, he'll claim to be Tom and tell you the most intimate details of Tom's autobiography."[7] And, "It was clear enough, then, that my current body and I could part company but not likely that I could be separated from my brain." Dennett could not be where his brain was, either, for how could he be in the vat which went nowhere, when in fact he was just then beginning to "make guilty plans to return to his room for a substantial lunch." Dennett seems to feel best with the idea that Dennett is where he thinks he is, though he believes that this would be a special form of *trompe'l'oil*, in other words a convenient fiction.

The plot thickens. Dennett's original body (Hamlet) is destroyed in some mishap, a prosthetic body is made for him so that Dennett as brain will not have to live on mainlined Brahms the rest of his life. Later a total cybernetic copy of his brain called Hubert is built. At first Dennett finds that he can switch from brain to cybernetic apparatus without any noticeable effects. At this point he tells us "Some of you may think that I really don't know who I am let alone where I am. But such reflections no longer make much of a dent on my essential Dennettness, on my sense of who I am. If it is true that in one sense I don't know who I am then that is another one of your philosophical truths of underwhelming significance."[8]

But this casal and trivialized contentedness is suddenly broken in the last two paragraphs. For, one time when flicking from original brain to cybernetic brain someone else pops up and tells

Dennett that it is Dennett's turn to be a helpless, bodiless homunculus.

Does this final twist suggest that following out the implications of the physcalistic position leads to the absurdity of two Dennetts or does it suggest that all of this is really quite ho-hum, unintelligible and unimportant, but really quite a lot of fun anyway?

It is hard to tell.

Notes

1 Dennett says, "Since I am still actutely conscious of my own amateur status as an observer of AI, I must acknowledge at the outset that my vision of what is important and why, is almost certainly still somewhat untrustworthy." "Artificial Intelligence as Philosophy and as Psychology" anthologized in *Reason at Work*, Cahn, Kitcher, Sher (New York: Harcourt, 1984) 713.

2 cf. "Skinner Skinned," anthologized in *Reason at Work*, Cahn, Kitcher, Sher (New York: Harcourt, 1984) 674.

3 In another sense than the one used here all speech acts, hence every word in as much as it can be said to mean is intentional. That should cause no ambiguity here, though it is an intricate matter and calls for special attention elsewhere.

4 cf. "Where am I?" *The Mind's Eye*, Hofstadter and Dennett (New York: Bantam, 1981) 218.

5 "Where am I?" 219.

6 "Where am I?" 219.

7 "Where am I?" 220.

8 "Where am I?" 228-229.