

# Intentionality

Phil 255

# Dan Dennett

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- Intentional systems are ascribed intentional sentences
- Known as a supporter of instrumentalism about beliefs
- Student of Ryle's
- Dennett seems to present a kind of softened behaviourism, by 'sort of' allowing intentional explanations
- All such explanations must repay their 'intentional loans' by giving a design, or physical level explanation

# Three levels of description

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- Design Stance
  - Teleological functional description (implementation independent)
  - Assume parts function correctly
- Physical Stance
  - Predictions rely on the laws of nature
  - Generally reserved for breakdowns
- Intentional Stance
  - Assume proper functioning and optimal behaviour
  - Ascribe epistemic possession of info & goal directedness

# Intentional stance

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- Do systems really have beliefs and desires?
- Dennett employs his instrumentalism here (perhaps)
- Suggests that intentional descriptions are both common and effective (often when other stances are impractical)
- Dennett notes this view suggests calling something an intentional system is relative

# Indispensability

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- Though not the only possible stance (e.g., insane people), it is by far the most common in dealing with complexity (e.g. people)
- Avoids claims of any kind of dualism, by noting that these 'intelligence loans' always have the promise of being repaid
- Behaviourism has the problem of not allowing this IOU
- Skinner is Dennett's main target here
  - Dennett claims the intentionality (qua action) is hidden by Skinner, who claims to be discussing motion
  - Rat example
- However, intentionality can't be a foundation for psychology, rather it is AI and neuroscience that can play that role (why?)

# Norms

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- Dennett suggests Believing would have no survival value unless it aimed at the truth
  - 'evidential well-foundedness' and 'accuracy' might be better
- This can explain the normative aspects of belief
  - rationality
  - accuracy of avowal
- The two norms can sometimes conflict, in which case intentional descriptions fall apart
- We can't allow partial rationality, so there is no avoiding this

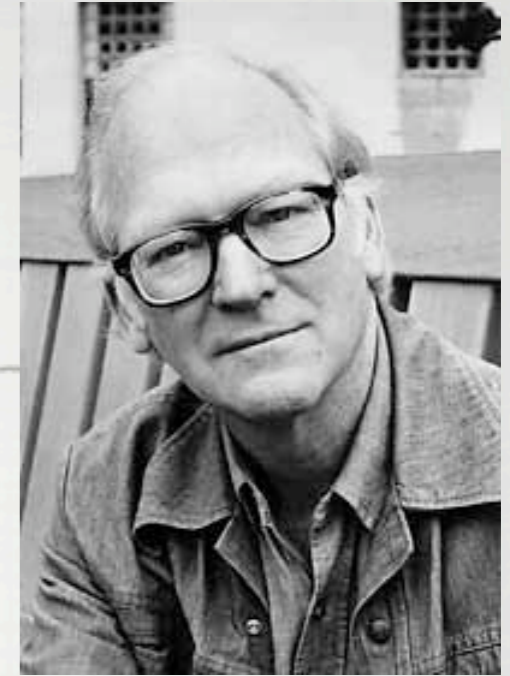
# Norms

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- So, there is no empirical theory of beliefs
- Consequences for psychology?
  - deny Dennett's analysis
  - or, agree that psychology won't be able to give a coherent picture of humans as intentional systems

# Davidson

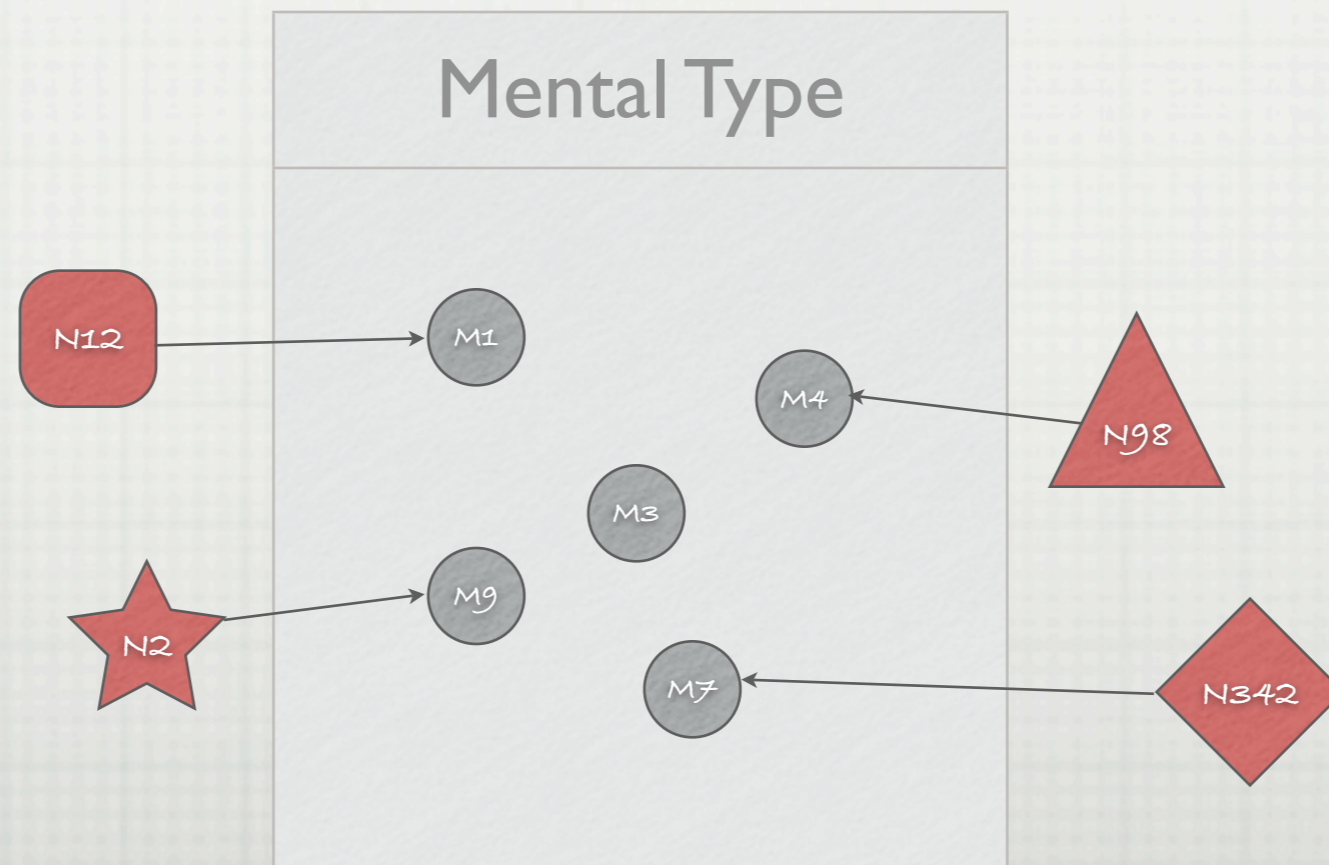
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- Interested in explanations of behaviour, but sees an important distinction between motion and action
- Davidson sees a tension between two aspects of our nature:
  - 1) actions are clearly part of the order of nature (i.e., they cause and are effects of external events);
  - 2) there are good arguments against the view that action can be explained with deterministic laws in the way that physical motion can be
- Davidson claims that an adequate theory of behavior has to reconcile both aspects

# Anomalous Monism

- Thinks they can't be reconciled and hence argues for Anomalous Monism
- Monism: all psychological events are physical events
- Anomalous: no general psychophysical laws to relate the two



# Against psychological laws

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- Davidson argues psychological laws resist continued improvement because they are irreducibly statistical
- Why?
  - Because when we attribute intentional states to a subject, we use subjectively determined concepts (i.e. determined by other intentional states of the subject)
  - This is unique to psychological explanation
- Because we can't substitute co-referring terms, we must rely on a very large subset subjective beliefs to determine the reference of the terms in any particular belief

# Against psychological laws

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- The Oedipus example is intended to drive this home
- He has all the right beliefs, but they aren't sufficient to explain his action as intentional
- In short, the massive interdependence of belief makes it impossible to give necessary and sufficient conditions for action
- We can't expect "serious laws" because we will never be able to determine in advance when the law can be applied. Compare:
  - $F = ma$
  - If I want X and doing Y will get me X, I will do Y

# Against psychological laws

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- Davidson suggests that when we determine someone's intentional states, we employ the conditions of coherence, rationality, and consistency
- Normally, these conditions will result in our properly determining the intentional states, but this is not guaranteed.
- So, all psychological laws will be “merely statistical” rather than hard and fast truths like those found in physics
- Suggests we shouldn't expect general psychological laws if identifying mental types is dependent on the set of beliefs
- Davidson also takes it is obvious that there are going to be no psychophysical laws

# Psychological explanation

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- Nevertheless, Davidson thinks such explanations are valuable because we don't have to know all the causal details and are still usually right
- Behaviorism was an attempt to substitute these messy details, by specifying antecedent conditions objectively
  - Davidson sees this project as a failure

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- Name the three stances and give an example of a physical stance description of a chess game.