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Interpretation in Action: A Preliminary Inquiry

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The term ‘human interpretation’ itself has two interpretations: interpretation *by* human beings and interpretation *of* human beings. We are all familiar with both kinds of interpretation in ordinary life. Marie interprets Sam’s remark as a sexual invitation; Joseph interprets the famous guest’s attire as an insult to the host. But as the organizers of our conference point out, we have no systematic explanation of human interpretation—either ‘of’ or ‘by’ human beings. Before embarking on a theory of human interpretation, however, we need to do some preliminary work. What is the *explanandum* of a theory of human interpretation? What is an explanation of human interpretation supposed to be an explanation of?

The general idea underlying the quest for a theory of human interpretation, say the organizers of the conference, is that “actions are events that we interpret as intentional.” I want to explore our ordinary notion of interpretation and then use the ordinary notion of interpretation to show that the view of actions as events interpreted intentionally is not a complete account of action. Then, I’ll turn to technical uses of ‘interpretation’ in so-called interpretationist theories of intentionality. The basic idea of interpretationist theories comes from Quine: To be intentional is to be interpreted in a “dramatic idiom,” the idiom of propositional attitudes—dramatic because attributions of attitudes like belief and desire are not fixed by the physical facts.¹

¹ W.V.O. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1960): 219.

Two familiar examples of interpretationist theories are Donald Davidson's theory of the anomalism of the mental, and Daniel Dennett's intentional-stance theory. Interpretation in the context of these theories is what marks off the intentional from the nonintentional. I want to distinguish use of the term 'interpretation' in an ordinary sense from use of the term 'interpretation' as a technical term in an interpretationist theory. I'll begin with ordinary interpretation. (The apparent alternative would be to begin by construing 'interpretation' as a theoretical term; if we did that, it is unclear to me why we would need a theory of interpretation other than the theory in which 'interpretation' was a theoretical term.)

My aim here is, first, to take preliminary steps toward a theory of human interpretation in an ordinary sense; second, to use the notion of ordinary interpretation to cast doubt on the view that construes actions as "events that we interpret as intentional;" and third, to undermine Dennett's intentional-stance theory. In Part I, I'll set out a series of examples of ordinary interpretation, and suggest some conditions on a theory of ordinary interpretation. In Part II, I shall present a counterexample to the view that an action is an event interpreted intentionally. The role of interpretation in action is not to convert (if that's the right word) a nonintentional event into an action. In Part III, I'll show that Dennett's theory cannot accommodate ordinary interpretation. I want to suggest boldly that if reality were as Dennett says that it is, then human interpretation—interpretation by human beings—would be impossible.

Part I: Ordinary Interpretation

It is convenient to begin with a couple of terminological comments. First, I shall restrict the term 'action' to intentional actions—roughly, to things done on purpose and not by accident. Second, I shall use the term 'intentional' very broadly, so that any phenomenon is intentional if it could not exist or occur in a world lacking beings with propositional attitudes. Intentional phenomena stand in contrast to nonintentional phenomena (e.g.,

bodily motions, vocal emissions, marks on paper), which could exist or occur in a world lacking beings with propositional attitudes. Writing a check is an intentional phenomenon because there would be no such thing as writing a check in a world lacking the social and economic conventions that presuppose that people have beliefs, desires and intentions. But many kinds of things are intentional: events (e.g., a baseball game), objects (e.g., a passport), actions (e.g., voting), properties (e.g., being in debt), dispositions (e.g., being honest), activities (e.g., reading your mail), institutions (e.g., a national bank)—all these are intentional. Intentional language contains terms (e.g., ‘wants a beer,’ ‘was elected president,’ ‘paid her taxes’) whose application presupposes that there are beings with propositional attitudes (beliefs, desires, intentions). Actions are always describable in intentional language.

Although I will focus on interpretation as it plays a role in action, we should regard interpretation in action as a special case of the broader category of interpretation. Many kinds of interpretations do not concern actions: The chemist interprets the results of the experiments as showing that the new drug is ready for clinical trials; the paleontologist interprets the bone fragment as belonging to an *Australopithecus africanus*; the radiologist interprets the x-ray; and the Freudian interprets the dream. Other kinds of interpretations, though still not directly concerned with actions, are interpretations of objects understood intentionally. For example, critics interpret texts; archeologists interpret shards of pottery. What we say about interpretation in the context of action should allow us to see these nonintentional interpretations to be species of the same genus.

Interpretation is a linguistic affair. Nonverbal interpretations—such as a cellist’s interpretation of Bach, a mime’s interpretation of a beggar, a student’s interpretation of a professor’s raised eyebrow—are, I think, parasitic on language. Anyway, what I am concerned with here is verbal. An interpretation is of something that has an already-accepted description in a context. The context is crucial. A single description may be an

interpretation in one context and not in another. Think of two contexts in which Picasso's *Guernica* is interpreted. In the first context, an art teacher is pointing out features to schoolchildren, and showing them how to interpret a region of color and line as a bull; in the second context, a modern history teacher is pointing out features to high-school students, interprets the bull as representing the forces of fascism. In the first context, the description, 'the bull,' is an interpretation; in the second context, 'the bull' is not an interpretation at all, but rather is what gets interpreted.

Relative to a context, an interpretation is a redescription of something with the aim of showing it in a certain light. There is no *redescription* without a prior description—where the priority is logical or conceptual (rather than temporal). An interpretation, then, has three features: A context, a prior description, and a redescription. The context is the source of the prior description. (In nondescriptive cases, something else plays the role of the prior description: the notes are interpreted by the cellist, the lines are interpreted by the actor, the professor's facial expression is interpreted by the students.) The context contains the relevant parties and their beliefs and interests. The context also determines the range of relevant redescriptions. For a redescription to be an interpretation, it must cast what was described by the prior description in a new light. So, the context also determines which redescriptions would be appropriate as interpretations.

The concept of interpretation, like so many ordinary concepts, resists regimentation. Since I have no sufficient conditions for interpretation in the ordinary sense, I'll use a series of examples to illustrate the various roles that interpretation can play in action.

I. In the first example, the police interview an witness. The police want a bare-bones description without interpretation. In this context, the witness's report that, from across the room, she saw the suspect writing

something on a yellow pad would count as a report of an uninterpreted fact. If the witness went on to say of the suspect that, from across the room, she saw him write a ransom note, she would be adding an interpretation. In this context, the prior description was 'writing on a yellow pad,' said of the suspect; the interpretation was, 'writing the ransom note.' In this context, 'writing on a yellow pad' was not an interpretation, but it did denote an action. Hardly ever would a witness be expected to give a nonintentional or physical description. In an eye-witness account, "just the facts"—the items to be subject to interpretation—are already intentional. In this case, what was uninterpreted so far was the suspect's writing on a yellow pad, an intentional action. The witness would probably be arrested herself for obstruction of justice if she gave an account in terms of the suspect's bodily motions. ("He had a long, thin rod-like thing in his hand, which was moving back and forth slightly above a flat surface." --Really, would you say that to a police officer?)

II. In the second example, a sergeant is walking past the window of an army barracks. He sees soldiers jump to attention suddenly and salute. From his vantage point outside, he can't see the door to the barracks, but he interprets the sudden salutes as response to an officer's unanticipated entry into the barracks. Here the prior description is 'salute,' and the interpretation is 'a sign that an officer's here.' But in a different context, 'salute' may be the interpretation. For example, a child and her mother in a city park see an honor guard practicing.. The child, who has never seen a soldier before, asks her mother what they are doing raising their hands like that. The mother responds that they are saluting. Here, saluting is an interpretation of the hand movement.

III. In the third example, a patient in a hospital has not moved since she had a stroke. The nurse notices that the patient's hand moves; the motion of the hand is a physical event, and the nurse interprets that motion as an action. The patient's hand didn't just move; the patient moved her hand, the nurse thinks. Here 'moving her hand' is an interpretation of 'her

hand's moving.' It is noteworthy how unusual is this kind of case in which a physical event is interpreted as an action. It is much more common that the prior description is already an intentionally-described action, before an interpretation even comes into view.

IV. In the fourth and final example, a wife trapped in a hopeless marriage storms into her husband's office and shouts, "I can't stand this another minute. I'm getting a lawyer." The husband does not hear a vocal emission and then interpret it to mean, "I can't stand this another minute. I'm getting a lawyer." No. What he hears is "I can't stand this another minute. I'm getting a lawyer." He may well interpret these words to mean that his wife is going to divorce him. But her shouting these words furnishes the prior description. In a different context, "I can't stand this another minute. I'm getting a lawyer" may well be an interpretation. In this alternate context, suppose that the wife storms into a noisy pub and shouts "I can't stand this another minute. I'm getting a lawyer." In the midst of the noise, the prior description may be 'some angry words about not standing it and getting a lawyer.' In this context, 'the wife's saying, "I can't stand this another minute. I'm getting a lawyer" may be an interpretation,' and so may be the indirect discourse report, 'the wife's saying that she can't stand it another minute and she's getting a lawyer.'²

Typically, in contexts of human action, what we interpret is something whose prior description is *already* intentional—writing something on a yellow pad, saluting (or even raising one's hand in that characteristic way), and saying, "I can't stand this another minute. I'm getting a lawyer." Almost never is an action-description an interpretation of bodily motions in the ordinary sense of interpretation. A faculty member interprets what the departmental chair tells her as a hint that she should publish more. I

² J.L. Austin distinguished locutionary acts (e.g., "He said to me 'Shoot her!' meaning by 'shoot' shoot and referring by 'her' to her") from illocutionary acts (e.g., "He urged (or advised, ordered, &etc.) me to shoot her) and perlocutionary acts ("He persuaded me to shoot her.") *How To Do Things With Words* (Oxford University Press, 1965): 101. In typical speech situations, the locutionary act provides the prior description, and the illocutionary act provides the interpretation.

interpret the cut in the budget of the philosophy department as a change of priorities in the university. You interpret your roommate's banging the dishes as an expression of anger. But each of these commonsensical examples of interpretation in action—including rather unusual case of the nurse's interpretation of the physical event of the hand's moving as an action—is a case of redescription in a context. In general, the distinction between what is interpreted and what is uninterpreted does not match up with the distinction between what is intentional and what is nonintentional.

Let me try to elicit from these examples some characteristics of interpretations—aside from the fact that typically (but not universally), the object of ordinary interpretation is already described intentionally. As a redescription, interpretation presupposes a prior description. What counts as a prior description varies, as we have seen, from context to context. So, if some item is interpreted—a text, an archeological find, a dream, a physical event, an action whatever—then there is a description of the item that is uninterpreted relative to the interpretation. All the examples have prior descriptions in the context: 'writing on a yellow pad,' 'a salute' / 'a raising of a hand in a certain way;' 'a hand's moving;' 'a burst of the words "I can't stand this another minute. I'm getting a lawyer."' The first characteristic, then, of ordinary interpretation is that interpretation presupposes prior description:

(C1) If there is a context C such that the description 'a G' is an interpretation of x in C, then there is a prior description of x in C, 'the F', and the F is redescribed as a G in C.

Moreover, interpretation is optional in that the existence of the item interpreted in a context does not depend on its being interpreted. Recall the examples just given: The suspect's writing on the yellow pad could have occurred without its being the writing of a ransom note; the soldiers' salutes could have occurred without their being a sign of an officer's unanticipated entry into the barracks; the patient's hand could have moved

without the patient's moving it; the wife could have burst out with her angry words without meaning that she was going to divorce her husband. The prior description applies to the item to be interpreted independently of the interpretation: The F would have existed and would have been an F whether it had been interpreted as a G or not.

(C2) If there is a context C such that the description 'a G' is an interpretation of x in C and 'an F' is a prior description of x in C, then x could have existed or occurred—and could have been an F—in C, without being a G in C.

The term 'interpretation' is ambiguous in the way that the term 'description' is—not surprisingly, since an interpretation is a redescription. A description may be thought of as an expression of the form 'an F' or 'the F'; but it may also be thought of as what results from an act of describing. Ordinary cases of interpretation, such as those in the examples, involve interpreters who produce the interpretations for particular audiences. Whether or not every interpretation must be produced by an interpreter, it is an incontestable fact that human beings sometimes actually do produce interpretations.

In those cases in which someone does actually produce an interpretation, not only must there be a prior description of the item to be interpreted in the context, but also the prior description must be available to the interpreter. That is, an interpreter must be able to identify the item to be interpreted independently of the interpretation. Again, all the examples bear this out: the witness, the sergeant (and the mother), the nurse, the husband. A third characteristic, then, of 'interpretation' in the ordinary sense is that when an interpreter produces an interpretation, the interpreter can identify the item to be interpreted independently of its interpretation:

(C3) If there is a context C, such that y interprets x as a G in C, then there is a prior description of x in C, 'an F,' and y can identify x as an F in C independently of interpreting x as a G in C.

I think that ordinary interpretations are ubiquitous, and that they have these characteristics. So, I'll take (C1)—(C3) to be conditions on a theory of ordinary interpretation. I do not know how to argue for (C1)—(C3)—other than to point to their plausibility and to invite you to think of a clear case of ordinary interpretation that violates any of them.

Part II: What Interpretation is Not

Many philosophers—like our organizers—take interpretation to be part of the nature of action. They construe an action to be an event interpreted in a certain intentional way. Initially, this view has a certain appeal. Indeed, many actions require observable bodily motions—that is, for many actions, we can identify a relevant nonintentionally-described event. For example, when a soldier salutes an officer, his arm moves. It is plausible to say in this case that the arm's moving is a nonintentional event that we interpret as a salute. Much of what we do involves bodily motions in the way that a salute does. But also much of what we do does not allow such easy identification of a nonintentional event to be interpreted intentionally. I want now to present an example of an action in which there is no relevant nonintentional event, and in which there is no role for ordinary interpretation to play.

Consider a high-school student, Ann, on the way to a class in English literature, where she is to recite Hamlet's soliloquy in front of the class. On the bus to class, she practices by reciting the famous soliloquy to herself. If you asked Ann what she was doing, she'd say, "Reciting Hamlet's soliloquy. I'm practicing because I have to recite it before the class. And I'm practicing silently because I'd feel silly reciting out loud in front of all these people on the bus." Recitation of Hamlet's soliloquy to oneself—in her

head, so to speak—is clearly an action. It is done for a reason: she wants to perform well in front of the class. Reciting Hamlet’s soliloquy again and again has effects: Ann certainly performs better than she would have if she had not practiced the soliloquy. The expression ‘reciting Hamlet’s soliloquy’ is clearly an intentional action-description. Reciting Hamlet’s soliloquy out loud is obviously an action. If reciting Hamlet’s soliloquy out loud is an action, then so is reciting it to oneself. Out loud or to oneself, it is the same kind of action—done for the same reason, and with the same effects. It seems to me that there’s no doubt that reciting Hamlet’s soliloquy is an action—whether out loud or to oneself. the action is reciting Hamlet’s soliloquy; silently is the way that she did it.

If the view that actions are events interpreted intentionally were correct, then we should be able to analyze her action as a nonintentional event plus an interpretation. It seems to me that neither is there a relevant nonintentional event to be interpreted, nor an interpretation—at least not an ordinary interpretation.

First consider whether we should construe the description ‘a recitation of Hamlet’s soliloquy’ itself as an ordinary interpretation. If so, then by (C1), there would have to be a prior description of the item to be interpreted as a recitation of Hamlet’s soliloquy. I do not believe that is a prior description of Ann’s recitation of Hamlet’s soliloquy; so, (C1) is not fulfilled. Perhaps in some other context, the description ‘a recitation of the passage beginning “To be or not to be: That is the question.....”’ could be a prior description, and ‘a recitation of Hamlet’s soliloquy’ could be an interpretation. Ann’s assignment was to recite Hamlet’s soliloquy before the class. So, what she set out to do was to practice Hamlet’s soliloquy. In carrying out her intention to practice Hamlet’s soliloquy, she recited the passage beginning “To be or not to be: That is the question...,” but the recitation of the soliloquy is not an interpretation of the recitation of the famous lines. (There is a sense in which she may offer an interpretation of

the passage when she recites it in front of the class if she speaks “with feeling” and special gestures. But that’s another matter.)

Even if one insisted that ‘recitation of the passage beginning “To be or not to be: That is the question.....”’ was a prior description of Ann’s recitation of Hamlet’s soliloquy, the same problem would arise again. The recitation of the passage beginning “To be or not to be: That is the question.....” is itself an action. So, if actions depended on interpretation, then by (C1), we would need a prior description of the recitation of the passage beginning “To be or not to be: That is the question.....” But, I believe, none can be found. Hence, the description ‘recitation of the passage beginning “To be or not to be: That is the question....”’ is not an interpretation of something. So, I’ll just continue to describe Ann’s action as a recitation of Hamlet’s soliloquy.

In any case, if ‘the recitation of Hamlet’s soliloquy’ were an interpretation, it would violate (C2) anyway. According to (C2), the item to be interpreted in the context exists independently of its being interpreted as a (silent) recitation of Hamlet’s soliloquy. I do not believe that there is any x such that both: (i) x could be interpreted as a recitation of Hamlet’s soliloquy in the context and (ii) x could have occurred without being a recitation of Hamlet’s soliloquy in the context. So, neither is (C2) fulfilled if we construe ‘a recitation of Hamlet’s soliloquy’ as an interpretation of what Ann is doing in the context in which she was practicing.

I offer this case of Ann’s silent recitation of Hamlet’s soliloquy as an example of an action for which nothing worthy of the name ‘interpretation’ (in an ordinary sense) is required or appropriate. I also offer this case as an example of an action for which there is no relevant nonintentional event into which Ann’s action can be analyzed. (There are many nonintentional events that are necessary for this action—e.g., Ann’s brain must be functioning normally in an awakened state—but these events are not part of the action and need not be accounted for in a theory of action.) If there were a

relevant nonintentional event into which Ann's action could be analyzed, then we would have a nonintentional prior description for 'recitation of Hamlet's soliloquy.' But we have just failed to find any description at all that could serve as a prior description of 'recitation of Hamlet's soliloquy'—much less a nonintentional description.

Certainly, *Ann* does not interpret something described nonintentionally as a recitation of Hamlet's soliloquy. If she did, then by (C3), she would be able to identify what she is doing independently of its being a recitation of Hamlet's soliloquy. But Ann has no nonintentional prior description of her recitation at her disposal. Indeed, what would a nonintentional prior description be a description of—Ann's brain states? It is unlikely, in my opinion, that there is a sequence of brain states that is (identical to) the silent recitation of Hamlet's soliloquy. But in any case, interpreting that sequence of brain states as Hamlet's soliloquy is clearly not what Ann is doing. (What would interpreting one's own brain states consist in, anyway—tokening another sequence of brain states? Then, there would be a regress.) Whatever connection there is between Ann's brain states and her reciting Hamlet's soliloquy to herself is not something that Ann herself effects. Therefore, Ann's reciting Hamlet's soliloquy to herself cannot be construed as Ann's interpreting her brain states.

Nor do we observers or theorists interpret Ann's brain states as a recitation of Hamlet's soliloquy to herself. Not only is it unlikely that there is a specific sequence of brain states that can be identified independently of Ann's reciting Hamlet's soliloquy to herself and can be interpreted as her reciting Hamlet's soliloquy, but even if there were such a sequence of brain states, we would have no access to it. In violation of (C3), we would be unable to identify the relevant brain states independently of their interpretation as a recitation of Hamlet's soliloquy. So, not only is Ann's saying, "I was reciting Hamlet's soliloquy to myself" not an interpretation of a sequence of her brain states, but also our saying, "Ann was reciting Hamlet's soliloquy to herself" is not an interpretation of a sequence of her

brain states either. So, in the case of Ann's silent recitation of Hamlet's soliloquy, there's no obvious nonintentional event that is being interpreted—by Ann or by us.

Therefore, I conclude that we have an example of an action that is not analyzable as an event interpreted intentionally—at least on any ordinary sense of 'interpretation.' In general, interpretation does not play the role of demarcating the realm of the intentional. In the first place, as we saw earlier, interpreted items have prior descriptions—independent of the interpretations—that are typically intentional themselves. In the second place, as we have just seen, some intentional phenomena, such as Ann's silent recitation of Hamlet's soliloquy, do not involve interpretation. So, we have intentional phenomena without interpretation. Conversely—as in the case of a scientist interpreting a blip on a screen as an electron—we have nonintentional phenomena that are interpretations. Interpretation is important, but interpretation is not necessary for marking off the intentional.

Part III. Objections and Replies

Let me consider two objections to my using Ann's recitation of Hamlet's soliloquy as a counterexample to the view of actions as events interpreted intentionally. The first objection is that I only considered ordinary interpretation in the discussion of the example of Ann, not interpretation as used in interpretationist theories, like Davidson's or Dennett's. The second objection is that a theory of action is intended to apply only to actions where there is an observable bodily motion. I'll take each of these in turn.

How do interpretationist views fare with respect to accommodating Ann's silent recitation of Hamlet's soliloquy? I'll discuss only Dennett in detail, because as I understand Davidson, to interpret (on his view) is just to employ an intentional vocabulary. 'Reciting Hamlet's soliloquy' is certainly

an intentional description, and so, trivially, on this use of ‘interpretation,’ ‘reciting Hamlet’s soliloquy’ is an interpretation. But since it is almost analytic that actions have intentional descriptions, I’m not concerned to argue about interpretation if ‘interpreted’ means only ‘described intentionally.’ It is unclear to me what Davidson would say is being interpreted in the example of Ann’s silent recitation of Hamlet’s soliloquy. So, I’ll leave Davidson to speak for himself.

Now consider Dennett’s intentional-stance theory, a theory that dictates a certain approach to the example that I described as Ann’s silent recitation of Hamlet’s soliloquy. Dennett recognizes different stances, from which different kinds of things are discerned. From the physical stance, physical things are discerned, and from the intentional stance, intentional things (like actions) are discerned.³ But things discerned from the different stances are not ontologically on a par. The existence and nature of physical things do not presuppose that there are any stances. But the existence and nature of intentional things presuppose not only that there are stances, but also that there are physical things.⁴ That there are intentional things at all presupposes that there are physical things, but not conversely. Anything that is intentional is a matter of interpretation, in Dennett’s words—a “heuristic overlay.”⁵ For Dennett, interpretation is a matter of taking an intentional stance.

³ There is also an intermediate design stance, which Dennett has recently aligned with the intentional stance. Dennett comments that “biology depends, in the end, on adopting the intentional stance towards the evolutionary process itself.” “Back from the Drawing Board,” in *Dennett and His Critics*, ed. Bo Dahlbom (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993): 224. The design stance, characterized by a distinction between function and malfunction, has occupied an unstable middle ground throughout Dennett’s work. For a discussion of the instability of the design stance, see my *Saving Belief: A Critique of Physicalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988): Ch. 8; “Instrumental Intentionality,” *Philosophy of Science* 56 (1989): 303-316. (Reprinted in *Mental Representations: A Reader*, Stephen P. Stich and Ted Warfield eds. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994): 332-344.) I’ll put aside the design stance here.

⁴ Daniel Dennett, “Real Patterns” *Journal of Philosophy* 88 (1991): 27-51. Reprinted in *Brainchildren: Essays on Designing Minds* (Cambridge MA: MIT/Bradford, 1998): 95-120.

⁵ Daniel C. Dennett, “Self-Portrait,” in *Brainchildren: Essays on Designing Minds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT/Bradford, 1998): 360.

Dennett's method is relentlessly third-personal. He requires that anything that counts as a phenomenon be publicly observable. Nevertheless, Dennett has devised a method—he calls it 'heterophenomenology'—which, he claims to be a way to "do justice to the most private and ineffable subjective experiences, while never abandoning the methodological principles of science."⁶ Heterophenomenology, he says, is adequate to explain all first-personal phenomena that need explaining. Ann's silent recitation falls within the purview of heterophenomenology because it is inaccessible to an observer.

Here is how heterophenomenology works. The theorist begins with a sound tape, perhaps accompanied by an electroencephelograph, of a subject—subject, Ann—who reports how things seem to her. From the taped sounds, a transcript is prepared. Then the theorist interprets the transcript as a record of speech acts. Both these transitions—from tape of noises to direct-quotation transcript and from direct-quotation transcript to interpreted text—require the theorist to adopt an intentional stance.⁷ So, the data to be explained are a subject's verbal reports about how things seem to her. We grant that these verbal reports are expressions of belief. What heterophenomenology is to explain is the etiology of beliefs that things seems a certain way to the subject.

But heterophenomenology cannot, by Dennett's own strictures, take nonobservable phenomena as *explananda*. On his view, there is nothing denoted by 'Ann's silent recitation of Hamlet's soliloquy' to be explained; the only thing there is to explain is Ann's *belief* that she is reciting the soliloquy. The (silent) recitation is beyond the reach of Dennett's methods, which are applicable only to the etiology of her belief. So, the only action that Dennett can countenance with respect to what we would call 'Ann's silent recitation of Hamlet's soliloquy' is her (publicly observable) report, "I

⁶ *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1991): 72.

⁷ *Consciousness Explained*, 76.

was silently reciting the soliloquy,” which is to be interpreted as her belief that she was reciting the soliloquy.

But this is surely unsatisfactory. It is Ann’s recitations of the soliloquy, whether silent or aloud, that explain her flawless performance in front of the class, not her *belief* about reciting the soliloquy. Moreover, the only thing about her belief that heterophenomenology explains is how she came to have that belief. And no part of that explanation can advert to the (alleged) fact that she actually was silently reciting the soliloquy. (To advert to the fact that she actually was silently reciting the soliloquy as part of the explanation that she believed that she was silent reciting the soliloquy would make the (alleged) fact that she was actually reciting the soliloquy part of an *explanans* of her belief—and Dennett will not even recognize such a fact as an *explanandum*, much less an *explanans*. Ann’s silent recitation, on Dennett’s view, is not a phenomenon at all.

However, I have just argued that Ann’s silent recitation is itself an action, whether Ann reports it or not. (It has effects; it was done for a reason, and so on.) So, Ann’s silent recitation is a phenomenon, regardless of her report of it. I conclude that Dennett’s notion of interpretation in terms of intentional-stance theory is inadequate to accommodate the phenomenon of Ann’s silently reciting Hamlet’s soliloquy.

Ironically, even if Dennett’s interpretationist view were adequate to treat the example of Ann’s silent recitation, it would still be wholly inadequate for ordinary human interpretation. Whether or not every interpretation must be produced by an interpreter, it is incontestable that there are human interpreters who sometimes do produce interpretations. But Dennett cannot make sense of an ordinary human interpreter. On intentional-stance theory, to interpret is nothing other than to be interpretable as interpreting. To be an interpreter is just to be interpretable as an interpreter.

Here is the problem: If, as Dennett has it, to be an interpreter is to be interpretable as an interpreter, then the role of interpreting is subordinated to the role of being interpreted. To put it metaphorically, Dennett collapses the active into the passive. Putting it this way brings to mind Socrates' analogy in the *Euthyphro*: being carried presupposes carrying, being seen presupposes seeing, being loved presupposes loving. Socrates's point is that the passive state (e.g., being seen) is dependent on the active state (e.g., seeing). I would like to say to Dennett something similar to what Socrates said to Euthyphro: Just as being seen presupposes seeing, being interpreted presupposes interpreting, and there is no such thing as being interpreted unless there is interpreting. Interpreting is logically prior to being interpreted.

But on Dennett's view, interpreting cannot be logically prior to being interpreted inasmuch as to interpret is to be interpretable as interpreting and to be interpretable as interpreting is to be interpretable as interpretable as interpreting. And so on—without end. On Dennett's view, doing something intentionally (interpreting) is not prior to being regarded as doing something intentionally (being interpretable as interpreting); indeed, they are one and the same thing. But surely there is a distinction: when a scientist interprets evidence, she is *doing something* (interpreting), not just being regarded as doing something, not just being interpretable as doing something (interpreting). (Of course, she is interpretable as interpreting; but that's not all that's going on.) So, I do not believe that Dennett can accommodate a tenable notion of an interpreter—as opposed to being interpretable as being an interpreter.

To raise the ante, let me suggest that Dennett's interpretationism is self-defeating.⁸ If his interpretationism is true, Dennett could not have thought it up. Or rather, it would be incoherent to say that Dennett thought it up—since to have thought it up would only amount to being interpretable

⁸ For an earlier attempt to do this, see *Saving Belief*, Ch. 8 and "Instrumental Intentionality."

as having thought it up.⁹ It's true that if Dennett thought up the theory, he can be interpreted as having thought it up, but thinking it up does not consist in being interpretable as having thought it up. There is no logical space in Dennett's interpretationism for the difference between thinking up a theory and being interpretable as thinking it up. (Nor, for that matter, between discovering the Higgs particle and being interpretable as discovering the Higgs particle. They would be one and the one thing.)

I conclude that—not only is Dennett's interpretationist view inadequate to handle the example of Ann's silent recitation—but also that it cannot accommodate ordinary interpretations by humans at all. Worst of all, it is self-defeating in that if true, then Dennett could not have thought it up. A theory of human interpretation should be not only a theory of interpretation *of* human beings, but also it should accommodate the fact that interpretations are sometimes interpretations *by* human beings. Whether or not Dennett's interpretationism is successful as an account *of* human beings, it can make no sense of what we do when we engage in interpretation.

Now consider the second objection to my treatment of Ann's silent recitation of Hamlet's soliloquy as not involving interpretation. The second objection is that a theory of action need not apply to mental actions—like reciting Hamlet's soliloquy silently—but rather that a theory of action should be restricted to actions that require observable bodily motion. This objection is theoretically unsatisfying. A restriction of a theory of action to actions requiring observable bodily motion would bifurcate the category of actions into “mental” vs. “physical” actions with unfortunate Cartesian

⁹ There are several important differences between Davidson and Dennett: Davidson does not eschew the first-personal, as Dennett does; and Davidson does not regard interpretation as in any sense prior to human interpreters, as Dennett does. But the key difference between Davidson and Dennett, I think, lies in differences in their understanding of the physical, and the relation of the physical to the intentional. (It seems to me that Davidson develops Quine's pragmatic side, while Dennett develops Quine's physicalist side.) For Davidson, in contrast to Dennett, what are described by the physical and intentional vocabularies are not themselves ranked hierarchically. In short, Davidson does not share Dennett's reductive physicalist program. So, my criticisms here are not aimed at Davidson.

echoes. There would be no natural connection between the “physical” actions (understood as intentionally-interpreted physical events) and “mental” actions; nor would there be any obvious way to extend the account of “physical” actions to “mental” actions. We need a unified conception of actions—such as that an action is something that is possibly done for a reason, and an intentional action is something that is actually done for a reason. The difference between reciting Hamlet’s soliloquy silently and reciting it aloud is outweighed by the similarity between the two recitations: The reason for reciting it, as well as the effect of reciting it, is the same whether the recitations were silent or aloud. So, I think that we need a unified account of action that reflects pre-theoretical similarities between actions.

Therefore, I do not think that either objection is successful. An interpretationist view like Dennett’s is inadequate to accommodate Ann’s silent recitation of Hamlet’s soliloquy—and worse. And Ann’s silent recitation of Hamlet’s soliloquy cannot be excluded on grounds that action theory need not apply to such actions. Thus, I rest my case that action does not require interpretation.

Conclusion

Interpretation *cannot* be the source or basis of intentionality if interpretations include interpretations produced by human beings. Producing an interpretation—or using an intentional vocabulary or taking a stance (intentional or not)—is already an intentional action. Therefore, we should not look to the notion of interpretation, either as understood by interpretationists or by everyday speakers to provide a *reductive* account of intentionality. Nevertheless, ordinary interpretation remains something that we may want a (nonreductive) theory of. I tried to take modest steps toward a theory of ordinary human interpretation by proposing (C1) – (C3).

Even so, there remain formidable obstacles to a theory of human interpretation. For example, a prominent feature of interpretation is that interpretations are subject to seemingly irresolvable disagreement. Historians, literary critics, and trial lawyers notoriously offer different interpretations of actions, texts, and evidence. How are conflicting interpretations to be evaluated? What conditions of adequacy are there on interpretations? What makes one interpretation better than another? These questions and others will have to await another occasion (or at least another talk).

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