J. HARVEY


Keith Campbell, “Colours”, in Contemporary Philosophy in Australia, ed. Robert Brown and C.D. Rollins (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969), esp. pp. 133-135. I regret that I did not have the advantage of knowing this paper in developing my own account. It seems not to have reached The Philosopher’s Index until the retrospective volume of 1980, and not to have had the influence on the literature which it deserves.

Campbell, pp. 146-147.


Whether or not red is well chosen here, it will serve to illustrate the basic philosophical point.

See J. J. C. Smart, “Colours”, Philosophy 36 (1961), pp. 126-137. Also, Colin McGinn in his book, The Subjective View (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), comments that “it would be senseless to criticise someone’s colour perception on the ground that his visual system divides the spectrum into more colours than ours does, since the making of (systematic) colour distinctions is constitutive of there being corresponding colour differences” (p. 152, fn. 39). This seems to involve the basic, intuitively appealing assumption I am arguing is incorrect.

THE PROBLEM OF ERROR:
A SURD SPOT IN RATIONAL INTENTIONALISM

V.J. McGeer

The notion of error is not univocal: there are many ways of going wrong and of getting it wrong – errors in action and errors in belief. Error, indeed, is one of the specialties of common-sense psychology. We are very good at describing in remarkable detail the origins, nature, and consequences of the many lapses, mistakes, misconstruals, misjudgments, improprieties and so forth that we tend to make or fall prey to. Moreover, it is no accident that our vocabulary for error is so very rich. Being able to go wrong in so many ways indicates the richness of our cognitive abilities, of our physical world, of our social world and of our complex interactions - often intentionally described - with the other interacting agents and objects around us. That we err is obvious; but attention to how we err will allow us to probe the strengths and weaknesses of philosophical programs that attempt to trace the contours of our being – primarily, that is, of our being rational – in the world.

There are two tendencies in the philosophical literature on error. The first is to consider error not so much in its own right, but rather and more simply in its negativity to going right or to getting it right. This tendency, which is particularly evident amongst those who adopt a “charitable” approach to the attributions of propositional attitudes, has been fostered by a philosophical concern with skepticism. Indeed, the hallmark of what I will call “rational intentionalism”, among whose leading proponents are Dennett and Davidson, is to link agent rationality to an incapacity for persistent, systematic and widespread error. The second tendency is to think of error almost exclusively in terms of false belief. In the philosophy of mind, this had led to a peculiar one-sidedness in the on-going debate between rational intentionalists, on the one hand, and representationalists, on the other, about the ontological status of intentional states. For the phenomenon of error so narrowly construed is seen to present a particular problem
for realists, i.e. advocates of the Representational Theory of Mind, and is thus taken as indirect support for the instrumentalist Rational Intentionalism. The aim of this paper is to rectify that imbalance, not in order to defend Representationalism, but to show that a consideration of error freed from rationalist prejudices reveals a common weakness in philosophical accounts of the folk psychological theory of behaviour.

Representationalists such as Fodor, Dretske, Millikan et al. claim that, since beliefs are representations whose content is more of less accurately determined by the things (objects/events/other beliefs) which cause them in the minds of their entertainers, and which is by means of them that we know about the world and direct our behaviour in it, the mechanism to account for error is ready at hand - it is misrepresentation. In fact, they claim, a creature's capacity for error lends credibility to their account. Fodor writes:

The point is that entertaining a mistaken belief is an intentional state par excellence, so there is a shot and well-travelled route from the contemplation of facts about perceptual errors, illusions and the like to the postulation of mental representations and other cognitive apparatus.

Detractors of the Representational Theory of Mind argue that this route is best avoided. If human cognition is portrayed as essentially involving the acquisition, manipulation and interpretation of mental representations, the skeptic gains a foothold by exploiting the gap which emerges between us and the world. If skepticism about the external world is to be combated by a "wide" construal of the intentional contents of representations the gap occurs between us and our representations, inviting skepticism about the contents of our own minds. If, on the other hand, representational contents are "narrowly" construed, we recover first person authority, but only by opening a gap between our representations and the world. The key, according to Davidson, is to avoid the "dogma that to have a thought is to have an object before the mind." But not to deny the obvious, he writes, Of course people have beliefs, wishes, doubts, and so forth; but to allow this is not to suggest that beamed in by ourselves. We do not invent, we do not create, we do not have when we think, we do not change our minds. We simply change our minds.

Rational Instrumentalist theory of the mental does not invoke representational intermediaries. The attributions of common sense psychology, according to both Davidson and Dennett, are made to rationalize a creature's behaviour and are therefore appropriate or inappropriate to this end. But while considerations of rationality do not precisely determine how we describe a creature's intentional states (there is considerable latitude in what rationalizing attributions we choose to make), they do severely constrain the role played in this process by the concept of error. Consider the following scenario:

Sue returns to her office late one evening because she believes her book is there and wants to finish reading it. Sue has a false belief. Unbeknownst to her, her colleague Harry has been reading this book. He supposed (falsely) that Sue had finished it and took it home himself to read. He concluded this because he observed Sue pick up the book just before she left, stare at it fixedly, then put it back on her desk after carefully moving a coffee cup to make room for it. But, Sue, who had picked up the book intending to put in her case, was distracted by a long-distance phone call. The book never made the bag even though Sue formed the (false) belief that it had, so she left the office without it.

In this story the individual's actions only make sense if we suppose they believe, at some crucial juncture, what is not the case. There is no difficulty in attributing (false) beliefs and desires in circumstances that do not defy rational explanation. They have what Dennett describes as "normal etiologies that we might call peripheral."

But there are more interesting kinds of errors than those of imply forming false beliefs. Sue believed she picked up the book and (while answering the phone) put it in her bag. We attribute that belief to her rationalization her leaving the office without it, even though she wanted to finish reading it. She would say that of herself later. But if asked at the time why she moved her coffee cup would you say to make room for the book she put back on her desk. Did she believe that she put her book on the desk? And if she believed this, could she also have believed she put her book in the bag? According to Dennett, these commonplace cognitive slips create a "rung spot, an uninterpretable gap, in the tale we tell of [her] from the intentional stance." He claims there is "to saying" what a person believes in these circumstances. And since there is no saying, we cannot explain her behaviour through attributions of beliefs and desires. Dennett says, "the gap is real and unescapable in the case of cognitive errors." For Dennett, this "no saying" is not a matter of simple indeterminacy. There is no rationalizing attribution to be made, though there are many "ad hoc" things we can say from the point of view of
common-sense psychology to overlap the gaps. She wasn't paying attention or she was distracted by the phone call and so on. But the gaps persist nonetheless, revealing the limitations of common-sense psychology as an explanatory and predictive theory. These limitations are unfortunate, but not catastrophic. Behaviour which cannot be explained or predicted from the intentional stance is not (in principle) inexplicable or unpredictable. We can always appeal to our biological and physical theories. Here, Dennett claims, "only complexity stands (practically) in the way of prediction...", and it is only complexity because it is only a way of talking, important though it may be, which we have lost in moving to a "lower" level of description. Dennett claims that the dispensability of intentional explanations is an advantage his theory has over that of his representationalist colleagues. Their theory commits them to a realist construal of intentional contents. Since Rational Intentionalism does not, Dennett need not get bogged down in the hopeless task of trying to attribute intentional states which simply do not 'add up'. Thus, Dennett concludes, the problem of error is simply one of those "unlocked doors" which representationalists waste so much effort in trying to break down. He writes: "Davidson and Dennett... there simply is no issue right where a major lacuna looms for Realists such as Fodor (and Burge and Dretske and Kripke and others...)." It is a tried and true strategy to dispatch one's opponents by showing that the intractable problems they encounter cannot be generated even by taking one's own approach. But the sanguinity with which Dennett dismisses these kinds of error - cognitive slips - is misplaced. Their conceptual significance lies in challenging the very notion of rationality that is the cornerstone of Dennett's instrumentalist account.

If we assume that the attribution of beliefs and desires is necessary to the explanation of an agent's behaviour qua the behaviour of an agent (in keeping with normative arguments against eliminativism), the gappiness introduced by cognitive errors doesn't just leave us in the dark about what we say of an agent in these circumstances. Since psychological concepts cannot be deployed, it leaves us in these moments without an agent to say anything of. Surely our intuitive conception of an agent is not so unstable. Sue is not Sue at one moment performing in a way that presupposes the rich intentional life of a cognitive agent, only to be supplanted at the next, by a neural net characterized by some physical state description 'X' and effecting the causal sequences 'A', 'B', 'C...': Yet if we suppose these gaps do not compromise the intuition that agents qua agents do have a certain cognitive integrity through time, then it seems we must acknowledge that what accounts for that integrity is not the agent's intentional states. What the agent does, its behaviour, does not need to be explained and predicted by appeal to beliefs and desires and so, a fortiori, does not need to be rationalized, but rather has only to be explained by appeal to our best physical and biological theories. Rationality and the attribution of propositional attitudes would be rendered coarse, not just here, but in all cases. One response Dennett or Davidson might offer is that this is not a dilemma they have to take seriously. Their theory, as they have often said, does not require that agents be ideally rational. Mistakes are allowable in so far as an interpreter can still discern a pattern of behaviour that displays the overall contours of rationality - the minor glitches here and there being inconsequential. The purpose of attributing beliefs and desires is not the precise prediction of behaviour or, where predictions fail due to cognitive lapses, its explanation. If precise prediction and explanation were the goals, it would be better to shift to a level of description that allows for a precise specification of the relevant variables (the level of physics, say). A psychological theory subsumes the goals of a proper scientific theory (explanation and prediction) to the goal of making a person understandable, and that means, of making her behaviour interpretable as conforming to a certain standard of rationality. Thus, in attributing propositional attitudes we may have to brush over the details of individual instances of behaviour in order to get the broader picture of a rational agent in the world.

But what exactly does brushing over individual instances of behaviour require, that no rationalizing attributions be made (we don't attribute the belief to Sue that she put her book on the desk) or that the attributions which rationalize this instance of behaviour be ignored in our overall assessment of a person's rationality? Dennett seems to waffle on this question. On the one hand, he has stated that in circumstances of cognitive slips there is no saying what a person believes. As Stick points out, this seems to give with his claim that being rational is not something that admits of degrees. Dennett writes: Any attempt to legitimize human fallibility in a theory of belief by fixing a permissible level of error would be like adding one more rule to chess: an Official Tolerance Rule to the effect that any game of
cheese containing no more than k moves that are illegal relative to the other rules of the game is a legal game of chess.12

On the other hand, both he and Davidson have wanted to maintain
all along that agents can make mistakes. But, as I have suggested, it is hard to see how making a mistake can be characterized except by
means of the attribution of propositional attitudes which are 
appropriate to their situations. Overall, considerations will emerge which
expose the agent’s fallibility, but this does not impugn her rationality.

"The claim," according to Dennett: (in a later work), "is that it is rational to be sometimes, sometimes not the pseudo-paradoxical
claim that it is rational sometimes to be irrational."13

Dennett has put his finger on the nub of the problem which errors
engender for his approach. They reveal that the "pseudo-paradoxical
claim" is avoided only by exploiting an ambiguity in the very concept
of rationality which drives the engines of the theory. Attributions of
propositional attitudes are made so that an agent’s behaviour is
interpretable as rational in the main. But this cannot be too stringent a
notion, since attributions will be made which rationalize particular
instances of behaviour as well, these attributions then constituting the
inconsistencies we must overlook. But if the concept of rationality (in
the main) is weakened to the extent that it becomes little more than, as
Dennett now calls it, a term of “cognitive approval”14, its force no
longer seems constitutive in the sense of determining what attributes
are to be made in a given instance, but only evaluative in the sense of
being used to assess the cognitive merits of attributions already made.

But then how are these attributions already made? If Dennett and
Davidson stick to the bare tenets of their approach, it is in accord
with a standard of rationality which is used to determine rather than
merely evaluate, and which breaks no deviations. What entitles them
to this double standard of rationality? It seems to be mere ad hocery
stemming from the supposition that a psychological theory which
imposes the template of rationality on the agents it hopes to
characterize can also take account of empirical findings.

The value of a Representational ‘Theory of Mind, of course, is that
it needs no double standard. The promise of its program is to give
some account of how intentional contents are specified prior to and
explanatory of normative considerations of rationality. R. G. Millikan
argues, for example, that while it is in the ‘proper function’ of beliefs to
participate in inferences (which, in her account, is definitive of their
being ‘representations’), their content – what they are about – is
determined by certain ‘mapping functions’ in accord with which they
correspond to objects and events in the world.15 This does not mean,
as in view, that Sue and other rational creatures lack the means for
determining when their beliefs are consistent, but that process (and the
complex cognitive devices that are responsible for it) is distinct from
the process of belief acquisition (or desire formation) and the complex
cognitive devices that are responsible for it.16 A creature’s rationality
may be assessed in terms of how well it deals with – checks, discards,
reforms, retains, manipulates – the information it receives (hence, not
passively, but actively17), but the errors it is liable to make do not rob
its internal states of intentional contents. On the contrary, it is
because, to use Millikan’s phrase, ‘intentionality and rationality are not
two sides of a coin’18 that the extent of a creature’s mistakes can be
assessed at all. Error, it might be said, makes sense only against a
background of content ascriptions made on consideration other than
those of rationality alone.

A more balanced discussion of error has thus produced something
of a stalemate in the on-going dispute between realists and
instrumentalists over the grounds for ascription of intentional content.
The problem realists encounter is in giving an independent
characterization of the states of a system that have the function of
determinately representing something in its environment and which,
therefore, govern intentional ascriptions. They need this
characterization to block Dennett’s argument that all functional
characterizations are merely interpretations – hence, subject to
indeterminacy. If the function of a representational device is a always
open to redescription – as genuine indeterminacy would imply – then,
as Dretske says, ‘it becomes impossible to fool the organism,
impossible to make it misrepresent anything.’19 It simply
‘represents’ whatever external conditions are causing its internal states.
And for the realism-minded these are insufficient grounds for its making
sense to say the organism is representing anything at all.

Now while Dretske, Fodor and other realists have tried to save
intentional ascriptions for humans at the very least by arguing that the
functions for our representational devices are not, to use Dennett’s
phrase, in the ‘eye of the beholder’, but determinately secured by our
cognitive organization,20 Dennett has claimed that what grounds
intentional ascriptions is not (directly) the constitution (physically or
functionally described) of the organism or system at all. What actually
grounds intentional ascriptions, in Dennett’s view, is the successful
deployment of a theory of interpretation whose constitutive norm is the principle of rationality. As interpreter who has succeeded in attributing beliefs and desires that rationalize an organism’s behaviour has no further question to ask about whether she has got the explanation right.

Well, what happens when the intentional strategy doesn’t work or doesn’t work very well? This is an vexing question for Dennett as the question of determinacy of function is for the Representationalists. That because his discussion of cognitive slips reveals a fundamental tension between two demands places on his account. The first demand is that common-sense psychology – or that part of it that is "worth keeping" – be unified, systematized and hence legitimized in the context of a proto-scientific theory of behaviour. This allows us to see that beliefs and desires are not just the mythical constructs of a way of talking, but further they are the well-behaved scientific abstracta of a powerful generative and efficient normative theory. Since this theory makes "ineliminable appeal to the rationality of the agent," it has an organizing structure that places a global demand on the explanation of behaviour which is to maintain the overall pattern of rationality. The second demand is that, while the attributions of beliefs and desires to an organism must make sense globally, it is local instances of behaviour that must be made sense of.

Now here’s the dilemma I have tried to bring to light: If the global demands of the theory force us enough to abandon rationalizing explanations of local behaviour – leading, for example, to the uninterpretable gaps of cognitive slips – the theory won’t satisfy the instrumentalism criterion for the grounds of intentional attributions – predictive and explanatory success. On the other hand, if empirical pressures force us to retain local rationalizations at the expense of ‘revising downward from the ideal of perfect rationality’ with which the theory began, it looks as if we have simultaneously undermined the standard in accord with which those globally problematic attributions were made in the first place.

Dennett seeks to avoid this dilemma by convincing us that occasions of our fallibility which bring these two demands – for theoretical integrity and for empirical adequacy – into conflict are rare. They must be rare, Dennett thinks, because as products of natural selection we are, he says, "percy rational". Thus the patterns of rationality given explicit form by intentional systems theory are objectively real, discernible in our behaviour despite the minor imperfections that normally emerge now and then. Furthermore, the most common of these seeming sub-optimal perturbations can be incorporated into the design of the patterns themselves. That is, by "fudging" with the concept of rationality, our mistakes can be reconstituted as strategies of a rational – i.e. efficient – organism. This "fudging" is not, according to Dennett, just opportunistic since it is guided by the pre-theoretical concept of rationality which he is convinced lies at the root of all explains successful folk psychological practice. Dennett’s appeal to our various intuitions is difficult to resist, but we should, I think, be wary. Given that we are not ideally rational, in whatever sense of “rational” Dennett prefers, no amount of concept gerrymandering will produce an unambiguous standard that can play an evaluative role, on the one hand, and on the other, underwrite the intentional attributions which must then be evaluated. This has forced Dennett to concede the need for supplementing, and even “correcting”, theory-driven explanations of behaviour with seat-of-the-pants empirical generalizations. But instead of recognizing the inherent instability of his position, Dennett takes this to show that we ordinary folk “are in this matter, as in most, satisfiers, not optimizers, when it comes to information gathering and theory constructions.”

So the view of folk psychology Dennett wants us to accept is this: a degenerate theory infected by practices that are ad hoc, variegated, complex and bordering on incoherent. Witness the kinds of things we are likely to say to overstep the gaps in the appropriate intensional characterization of Sam’s cognitive state when she suffers her lamentable lapse: “She wasn’t paying attention” or “she was distracted.” or “she had too many things on her mind”, and so on in similar messsy fashion. How can this be an explanation of her behaviour? Ordinary folks might mistakenly construe it as such – they might even use such claims predictively – but, Dennett claims, genuine intentional explanations are reason explanations and, of course, “people don’t make mistakes for reason.” Thus, the folk jargon of error is genuinely a comme de parler – an unsystematizable, jury-rigged, haphazard means for getting around when there’s nothing sensible to say. As such, it is not worth saving in intentional systems theory even if somewhere, somewhere, it could be.

It is ironic that n trying to account for the success of common-sense psychological explanations, Dennett discounts the very kinds of discourses that ensure its success. And what justifies the exclusions he is determined to make? Nothing, I claim, in our ordinary sense-
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Making a mistake is to be expected. When a mistake is made, it is often followed by a feeling of embarrassment, shame, or guilt. However, mistakes can also be a valuable learning opportunity. The process of learning involves making mistakes, and it is through these mistakes that we can grow and improve. It is important to remember that mistakes are a natural part of the learning process and should be embraced, not avoided. By embracing mistakes, we can develop a growth mindset and become more resilient in the face of challenges. In conclusion, mistakes are not only inevitable but also essential to our personal and professional growth.
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expectations continually disappointed does not provoke the search for systematic modifications that recalibrates does for scientific theorizing. Although we may modify some of the generalizations about people we tend to accept it the past, we are just as likely to rest content with the thought that this person is an "exception to the rule" or this act was "out of character" – perhaps with reason, or perhaps not. Maybe we suppose they have a bad day – hence, particularly liable to various mistakes. I conclude, therefore, that a philosophical inquiry into the nature of folk psychology should not be the quest for a theory supporting the generalizations which we are just as likely to set aside without compunction in our attempts to get on with others; rather, it should be an inquiry into the circumstances, skills and abilities which enable us to understand each other in the absence of anything like a systematic theory.1,2

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NOTES

1 J. Fodor, "Why Paramedics Don't Have Mental Representations," Midwest Studies in Philosophy 10 (1987) 7. Drechsler also emphasizes the importance of going wrong: "What we are after is the power of system to say, mean, or represent (or, indeed, take) things as P whether or not P is the case. That is the power of words, of beliefs, of thought – the power that minds have – and that therefore is the power we are seeking in representational systems. Whatever word we use to describe the relation of interest (representation) meaning; it is the power to misrepresent, the capacity to get things wrong, to say things that are not true, that helps define the relation of interest. That is why it is important to stress a system's capacity for misrepresentation, For only if a system has this capacity does it have, in its power to get things right, something approximating meaning. That is why the capacity to misrepresent is an important aspect of intentionality and why it figures so large in the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of language." – Explaining Behaviour: Reasons in a World of Causer (Cambridge: MIT Press/A Bradford Book 1985), 65.


3 Davidson, "Knowing One's Own Mind", 454.


5 Ibid., 103. This type of cognitive error has been discussed with similar critical intentions by Stephen Stich in "Denotext on Intentional Systems", Philosophical Topics 12 (1984) 38-62. Dennett's reply constitutes Chapter 4 of The Intentional Stance.

6 Ibid., 104.

7 Ibid., 103-106.

8 Ibid.

9 The image is Dennett's from "Evolution, Error and Intentionality" in The Intentional Stance, 294.

10 "Midterm Exam: Compare and Contrast" in The Intentional Stance, 345.

11 I would like to thank Bruce Hunter and Arthur Ripstein for warning me away from a stronger (and less tenable) version of this point.


13 "Making Sense of Ourselves" in The Intentional Stance, 98.

14 Ibid., 97.

15 R.O. Millikan, Language, Thought and other Biological Categories: New Foundations for Realism (Cambridge: The MIT Press/A Bradford Book 1984), 139-140. Millikan's account of how these mapping functions ("mathematical sense") are determined, hence what the contents of representations are, appeals to the Proper (qua evolutionarily adaptive) functions they serve in accord with a Normal (again in an adaptive sense, not necessarily "average") explanation. Her view is articulated in a complex manner, defying even minimal characterization in a footnote.

16 Collapsing these two processes into one is a manifestation of the syndrome Millikan calls "meaning rationalism." This syndrome is the chronic problem of traditional epistemologists, new-fangled functionalists, and meaning holists. Millikan's book is sweeping in its condemnation of theories in the philosophies of mind and
language and highly suggestive about what might be erected in the
void.
17 Ibid., Chapter 15: "The Act of Identifying".
18 Ibid., 140.
University Press 1986) 32.
20 For a discussion of this issue, see Dretske, Explaining Behaviour:
Reasons in a World of Causes, Ch. 3.
21 For important differences among these various accounts, see, for
example: Dretske, op cit.; Fodor, Psychosemantics (Cambridge: MIT
Press/Bradford Book; 1987); and Millikan, Language, Thought and Other Biological Categories.
22 Dennett, "Three Kinds of Intentional Psychology", in The Intentional
Stance, 48.
23 Ibid.
24 See Dennett, "True Believers" in The Intentional Stance, 21.
25 Ibid., "Three Kinds of Intentional Psychology" in The Intentional
Stance, 50. See also, "Evolution, Error and Intentionality" in The
Intentional Stance.
26 "Making Sense of Ourselves" in Evolution, Error and Intentionality, 47-54.
27 "Making Sense of Ourselves" in The Intentional Stance, 97-98.
28 "Three Kinds of Intentional Psychology" in The Intentional Stance,
97-98.
29 Ibid.
30 Notice how none of these things is equivalent to the philosophical
strategy of accounting for apparent irrationality by dividing the mind.
That is to say, we account for a person's having inconsistent beliefs
by supposing the beliefs themselves occupy different spaces (however
that is made out), or more radically, that different persons occupy
the same body. Neither one of these strategies seems to me particularly
attractive. If these divisions are to be justified, it can only be by
appeal to the principle of rationality underlying the very theory that
is brought into question by the possibility of a person's having
inconsistent beliefs, or even by making the kinds of errors discussed
above. It is one of the attractive features of folk psychology that it
does not make irrationality or error disappear qua irrationality or qua
error in order to account for its manifestations.
31 "Making Sense of Ourselves" in The Intentional Stance, 86.
32 See ibid., 87.
33 The alternatives are described by Dennett, "Three Kinds of Intentional
Psychology" in The Intentional Stance, 86.

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36. See Dennett, "Setting Off on the Right Foot," in The Intentional
Stance, 5.
37. This inquiry has already been launched by some. See, for example,
Arthur Ripstein’s "Explanation and Empathy" in the Review of
38. I would like to thank Deborah Brown, Sue Campbell, Bruce Hunter,
Arthur Ripstein and especially Randall Keen for helpful comments on
earlier drafts of this paper.

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