

## **“Desire considered as a propositional attitude” (excerpt)**

### **W.G Lycan**

From *Philosophical Perspectives*, 26 (2012): 201-215.

To begin with Dennett (1987): Behavior prediction...is a matter of extrapolating from what a creature *ought to* believe given its circumstances and perceptual capacities, and what it *ought to* desire in those circumstances given its needs. We then presume that it does believe and want those things, and predict that it will reason and behave rationally given those beliefs and desires. Metaphysically, Dennett maintains that for the creature to have beliefs and desires just is for this method to succeed in its case.

But Fred Schueler (1995) has made what I think is a compelling argument against the desire side of Dennett’s epistemology. Everyone who works in this area agrees that “desire” is ambiguous as between at least two readings.<sup>1</sup> Terminology differs, and the distinction is drawn in slightly different ways, but it is at least the following.

In one sense of the term, it is entirely commonplace that we do things we do not want to do. I often do things I have no desire *at all* to do; I do them against my will, but for what I consider good and overriding reasons; and I am quite sure the same is true of you. Schueler calls desires in this sense “desires proper.”

But there is also a sense in which, if I did do X voluntarily, I must have ultimately wanted to do X; after all, I did choose to do X. Schueler calls desires in this sense “pro-attitudes.” That is a more general, presumably the most general, conative category; of course it includes desires proper.

Now Dennett faces a dilemma. Suppose that by “desire” he means merely pro-attitudes. Then desires cannot be used to predict behavior at all, because you cannot learn what pro-attitude someone has in the choice of doing X vs. doing Y until the person has actually done X or Y.

But suppose Dennett means desires proper. Then you will get predictions, but often the wrong ones. For, as noted above, we often go against our desires proper. A different sort of conation overrides, and we do something we do not desire-proper to do.

Though Schueler presents his dilemma as a critique of Dennett, notice that it applies against the entire belief-desire picture. If “desire” means desire-proper, then as before desires are only one kind of pro-attitude; they do not predict action with any reliability and they only sometimes explain it. But if “desire” means just any pro-attitude, desires cannot in principle predict behavior and can only vacuously explain it.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The point goes back at least to Locke (1974).

<sup>2</sup> Of course, one may come much closer to predicting behavior if one has some independent access to the subject’s *other pro-attitudes*.

## References

- Dennett, D.C. 1987. *The Intentional Stance*. Cambridge, MA: Bradford Books / MIT Press.
- Locke, D. 1974. "Reasons, Wants, and Causes." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 11: 169–79.
- Schueler, F. 1995. *Desire*. Cambridge, MA: Bradford Books / MIT Press.