

ON DENNETT'S CONDITIONS OF PERSONHOOD

Fredric C. Young

Daniel Dennett, in "Conditions of Personhood," Richard Rorty, ed., The Identities of Persons (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), writes on the concept of a person. In this paper I shall a) discuss Dennett's six conditions for personhood, b) offer objections to some of his conditions and c) show how his concept of a person may be, in one sense, too broad and, in another, too narrow.

Dennett doubts whether we can ever come up with a satisfactory theory of personhood. He cautions: "In the end we may come to realize that the concept of a person is incoherent and obsolete." This is in spite of the fact that "it is difficult or even impossible to conceive of what it would be like if we abandoned the concept . . ." (p. 175). For Dennett, it turns out that we lack objective criteria for applying the notion, and accordingly, it may add nothing to our knowledge.

But aside from incoherence and obsolescence, a concept of the person could fail in being empty. Dennett states: "If then the concept of a person is in some way an ineliminable part of our conceptual scheme, it might still be in rather worse shape than we would like. It might turn out, for instance, that the concept of a person is only a free-floating honorific that we are all happy to apply to ourselves, and to others as the spirit moves us, guided by our emotions, aesthetic sensibilities, considerations of policy, and the like, just as those who are chic are all and only those who can get themselves considered chic by others who consider themselves chic. Being a person is certainly something like that, and if it were no more, we would have to reconsider if we could the

importance with which we now endow the concept" (p. 176).² This then is the Scylla and Charibdis that an adequate theory of the person must avoid. That is, such a theory must show why the concept is coherent and usable on the one hand, and unlike the concept of chic, on the other.

To add to our problems, we seem to have two separate but intertwining ideas of a person: the metaphysical and the moral. As to the former, it stipulates that a thing is a person only if, roughly, it is an intelligent, conscious, feeling agent. The moral concept of a person is of a being who is morally accountable; it is appropriate either to praise or blame or ascribe to him rights and responsibilities. So the philosopher's task becomes suitably complicated as he considers the question: "Does the metaphysical notion [of a person] . . . coincide with the moral notion?" (p. 176).

Dennett does not even attempt to solve all of these problems and come up with a comprehensive theory of the person. Instead, he outlines six necessary conditions for a thing's being a person in the moral sense. He conceives of his task as follows: "What will be at issue here is first, how . . . they [the six conditions] are dependent on each other; second, why they are necessary conditions of moral personhood, and third, why it is so hard to say whether they are jointly sufficient conditions for moral personhood" (p. 177). Dennett tries to answer all three questions.

Now, I shall present Dennett's six conditions. They are as follows:

1) "The first and most obvious theme is that persons are rational beings" (p. 177). Dennett does not fully discuss what he means here. However, for him, rationality seems to involve at least as much and possibly more than following the economist's principle of rationality. The latter states: an agent is rational just in case he maximizes his utility (or profit) and minimizes his disutility (or cost). This rule does not legislate ends, but rather stipulates that someone's being rational is that entity's choosing the most effective means to an end, i.e., the one which will maximize his benefit. Dennett may also have in mind something like Aristotle's concept of "reasonableness": a notion that there are some ends, e.g., misery, that it is never rational to choose. A rational being is, so to speak, a sensible being.

2) "The second theme is that persons are beings to which states of consciousness are attributed, or to which psychological or mental or Intentional predicates, are ascribed" (p. 177). The term "Intention" (with a large-case "I") is a technical one for Dennett. It does not

mean intentions in the ordinary sense, i.e., it does not refer to motives or purposes alone. The term instead refers to any mental state, e.g., volition, emotion, feeling, intention, imagination, etc., which we would normally say is about something. That is to say, an emotion, like fear, is never simply fear. It is always fear of something. And hope may spring eternal, but it is hope that something will happen. Or consciousness is always consciousness of something. And thus the term "is conscious" is an Intentional predicate in Dennett's usage. I will speak more about this below, as well as explain the significance of Intentions.

3) "The third theme is that whether something counts as a person depends in some way on an attitude taken toward it, a stance adopted with respect to it. This theme suggests that it is not the case that once we have established the objective fact that something is a person we treat him or her or it in a certain way, but that our treating him or her or it this certain way is somehow and to some extent constitutive of him or her or it being a person" (pp. 177-8).

I want to introduce a distinction which, I think, will enable us to understand Dennett more clearly. Namely, I wish to distinguish between someone's being a person de re and his being a person de dictu. X's being a person de re involves X's really being a person, i.e., it entails that it is an objective fact that he meet Dennett's conditions of personhood. Take the Untermenschen in Nazi Germany, for example, the Jews. If anything can count as such, they were, in fact, persons. And this was true, regardless of the stance that the rulers of Germany, or anybody else, adopted toward them, namely, that they were nonpersons. In short, in the de re sense, it is not the case that a thing is a person if and only if we treat it as such. But in the de dictu sense of "being a person", this would be true. This is perhaps what Dennett had in mind when he said that the concept of a person is something (although of course not entirely) like the concept of chic. A person is never de re chic, i.e., there are no objective criteria to establish whether "chic" is true of him. He is chic if and only if people adopt a certain stance toward him. He is chic de dictu. Similarly, stance is constitutive of a thing's in the de dictu sense, being a person. This will be the stance, needless to say, that ascribes to it the conditions of personhood.

4) "The fourth theme is that the object toward which this personal stance is taken must be capable of reciprocating in some way This reciprocity has sometimes been rather uninformatively expressed by the

slogan: to be a person is to treat others as persons . . . " (p. 178). I shall discuss this condition below.

5) "The fifth theme is that persons must be capable of verbal communication. This condition handily excuses nonhuman animals from full personhood and the attendant moral responsibility, and seems at least implicit in all social contract theories of ethics" (p. 178). It is hard to know quite what to make of this condition. Strictly speaking, in one way, it is simply false. A deaf/mute, who is incapable of verbal communication, is surely a person. And so is an autistic child, who is incapable, in any respect, of communication with other moral agents. The child has rights and responsibilities, and we may hold him morally accountable. We may excuse him from his responsibilities, and fail to punish him or blame him due to his plight. But in so doing, seemingly, we are aware that we are excusing a moral agent, or person in the moral sense, and not that we are dealing with something subpersonal.

But perhaps my distinction between de re and de dictu senses of being a person can rescue Dennett here. That is, an agent need not be, in reality, capable of verbal communication. And all that we need for X's fulfilling this condition of personhood is that we treat him as if he could verbally communicate. However, there are difficulties in this reply which may become clearer below in a more extensive discussion on how to deal with problems in Dennett's view.

6) "The sixth theme is that persons are distinguishable from other entities by being conscious in some special way: there is a way in which we are conscious in which no other species is conscious. Sometimes this is identified as self-consciousness of one sort or another" (p. 178).

Dennett argues that these conditions, however necessary they might be, are not jointly sufficient. His reasoning is as follows. These conditions make the concept of a person inescapably normative, i.e., an ideal standard. He states: "Human beings or other entities can only aspire to being approximations of the ideal, and there can be no way to set a 'passing grade' that is not arbitrary. Were the six conditions (strictly interpreted) considered sufficient they would not ensure that any actual entity was a person, for nothing would ever fulfill them . . ." (p. 193). That is to say, because of the normative character of the concept of the person, there may not be an object which is de re a person. This will get Dennett into trouble, as we shall see.

But first I shall discuss Dennett's notion of an Intentional system. The first three conditions of being a person, rationality, Intentionality, and stance do not define a person, but a much wider class of objects. These are Intentional systems. Dennett says: "An Intentional system is a system whose behavior can be (at least sometimes) explained and predicted by relying on ascriptions to the system of beliefs and desires (and other Intentionally characterized features, what I will call Intentions . . .) [see above] . . . There may in every case be other ways of predicting and explaining the behavior of an Intentional system, for instance, mechanistic or physical ways, but the Intentional stance may be the handiest or most effective or in any case a successful stance to adopt, which suffices for the object to be an Intentional system" (p. 179).

An object is an Intentional system if and only if we can appropriately or justly or correctly say of it that it performed an act, or caused an event because it wanted to, or because it believed that it was the right thing to do, or because it feared the consequences if it did not, etc. Or in other words, a system is Intentional just in case we can explain or predict its behavior, to employ an old scholastic term, in teleological ways. If it is appropriate to ask of it "Why did it do that?" and receive an answer in terms of Intentions, then that object or system is an Intentional one.

Dennett goes on to say that "It is important to recognize how bland this definition of Intentional system is, and how correspondingly large the class of Intentional systems can be. If, for instance, I predict that a particular plant--say a potted ivy, will grow around a corner and up into the light because it 'seeks' the light and 'wants' to get out of the shade it now finds itself in, and 'expects' or 'hopes' there is light around the corner, I have adopted the Intentional stance toward the plant and, lo and behold, within very narrow limits it works" (pp. 179-80). But further, we could treat a chess-playing computer as wanting to win the game. And for that matter, if it were a successful stance to take towards them, then stones or other inanimate objects would be Intentional systems.

It is important to realize some of the implications of the notion of an Intentional system. It is not simply that we can adopt the Intentional stance correctly toward only those objects which are objectively Intentional systems. For we may never, for Dennett, be able to do so with objective validity. So he is not using "being an Intentional system" in the de re sense. He is using it, rather, in the de dictu sense, i.e., he is saying that an object is an Intentional system just in case we adopt the Intentional stance toward it. If we ascribe Intentions to

an object, that constitutes its being an Intentional system.

We can understand the condition of reciprocity in terms of Intentional systems. Dennett says: "Let us define a second-order Intentional system as one to which we ascribe not only simple beliefs, desires and other Intentions, but beliefs, desires, and other Intentions about beliefs, desires, and other Intentions. An Intentional system S would be a second-order Intentional system if among the ascriptions we make to it are such as S believes that T desires that p, S hopes that T fears that q, and reflexive cases like S believes that S desires that p" (p. 181). Reciprocity is simply the ability to form second-order Intentions. Paradigmatically, they may be about other agents' Intentions, but they need not be. And once again, a wide class of objects could be second-order Intentional systems. We can ascribe second-order Intentionality to animals. Dennett gives the example of a dog who goes to the door, seems to want to get out, thus getting her Master to go to the door. The dog proceeds to hop on her Master's chair. We would say, for Dennett, that the dog hoped that her Master would believe she wanted out. This would not only be a second-order, but possibly a third-order Intention. Dennett says: "We can make this point more general . . . : where x is attempting to induce behavior in y which is inappropriate to y's true environment and needs but appropriate to y's perceived or believed environment and needs, we are forced to ascribe second-order Intentions to x" (p. 183).

X could even be a tree. Dennett gives the example of apple-growers "tricking" an apple tree into "thinking it's spring" by building a small fire under its branches in the late fall. It will bloom. Any time ascription of second-order Intentions will help us understand or predict behavior, we are justified in so ascribing them. And once more, it does not matter whether these predicates are objectively true of the thing in question. For we are using the Intentional predicates once again in the de dictu sense. It is our attitude which constitutes a Thing's being a second-order Intentional system. So it is this attitude which is essential to moral personhood. In short, a thing cannot be a person, in the de dictu sense, unless we adopt the stance toward it that it is a second-order Intentional system.

Finally, we can understand the condition of self-awareness in terms of reciprocity. The former simply is a special case of the latter, involving second-order volitions. A second-order volition is an Intention about one of our desires. I have a desire to stop writing this paper and to run down the street screaming. I have another desire about that desire, namely, to suppress it.

My desire to suppress a desire is a second-order desire. And a thing cannot be a person, unless we ascribe second-order volitions to it.

Now, there are some problems with equating the special way in which we must be self-aware with second-order volitions. For one thing, the latter is a technical notion that seems very difficult to match up with our ordinary concept of self-consciousness. When I am aware of myself, must I be aware of some of my Intentions? Why cannot I just be aware of me? And if I can be self-aware without consciousness of Intentions, then, I am inclined to think, I need not have a second-order volition to be self-aware. But then self-awareness is not identical to having second-order volitions. But I shall not develop this objection, and proceed to some more serious ones.

My main criticisms of Dennett divide neatly into two categories: a) I find difficulties with his notion that second-order Intentions and volitions are necessary for full moral personhood, and b) I find that if we take "being a person" in the de dictu sense, Dennett provides us with too broad a line of demarcation for personhood. If, on the other hand, we take "being a person" in a de re sense, Dennett's views suffer the opposite failing, and provide a much too narrow criterion for personhood.

As to (a): I would like to begin with a discussion of two unfortunates. There is Jones, who due to an accident is paralyzed, deaf, dumb, and blind, and suffers from serious brain damage. The second story is about a moral monster. In both cases, the agents involved will lack second-order Intentions, and we will not ascribe any such quality to them. Yet, I will argue, we would adopt the attitude that the accident victim and the moral degenerate are persons in the moral sense, i.e., we would hold them morally accountable and grant them rights and responsibilities.

Jones is unaware that any other agents exist due to his inability to speak, hear, see, move, or communicate. He merely has rudimentary thoughts. He only has desires about the world--to eat, sleep, evacuate, and to live. He is too weak to think reflectively about his condition.

This is a plausible story. It may even be true of many people. But in Dennett's view, if we do not adopt the stance toward Jones that he is a second-order Intentional system, then he is not, in the relevant sense, a person. But I take it that, intuitively, we feel that even if we do not ascribe to Jones second-order Intentions, and say we do not, we would still adopt the stance toward him that he is a person. This seems the only way to account for our empathetic reactions to

individuals in plights similar to his. Now, Dennett would be hard-pressed to explain why the latter stance would not be constitutive of personhood. We are treating Jones as a person, and it seems entirely arbitrary to say on Dennett's view that this would fail to make Jones such. But if this stance makes Jones a person, then it is the case that (1) Jones has de dictu personhood and (2) he lacks one of Dennett's necessary conditions for such status.

But Dennett could reply that he is equating moral personhood with the conditions of moral accountability, and those by which individuals have rights and responsibilities. And given our acknowledgement of Jones's situation, it is impossible to see how we could treat him as either praiseworthy or blameworthy. After all, he can barely function. So Jones is not, de dictu, a person. And our case cannot work as a counter-example.

But it is not true, in principle, that we would not be in a position to either praise or blame Jones. Jones cannot encounter us. But suppose we could encounter him. For example, say we could read his mind, and we found him thinking, "I want to live."

This would give Jones a first-order Intention, but not a second-order Intention. He feels no pride, shame, hope, etc., over his wish to live, and he is as unaware of his thinking it as he is that there are other agents. However, even believing that he lacks second-order Intentions, we could either praise or blame him for his wish to live. Depending on our moral standards, we could, e.g., praise him for his courage in adversity or blame him for being so selfish, as his survival places demands on those who must attend him.

Moreover, we would grant Jones rights. We may give him the right to life, or alternatively, the right to die in dignity. And we may ascribe responsibilities to him, e.g., the responsibility not to want to live, although we may excuse him, if under the circumstances he fails to live up to them. So Dennett's reply does not work.

Now, I wish to talk about a moral monster. I will first say that to have second-order Intentions does not seem to be a necessary condition of being a person in the metaphysical sense. The latter concept is of an intelligent, conscious, feeling agent.

And we can surely imagine creatures who are intelligent, conscious and have feelings but only have first-order Intentions. That is, they have beliefs, wishes, desires, etc., about objects. But they never have beliefs, wishes, desires, etc., about beliefs, desires,

and wishes. They are totally unreflective. There is nothing self-contradictory or absurd in this suggestion. I imagine these creatures in order to block an obvious objection to the Jones story. That is, Jones is a defective human being and our notion of a person is so bound up in the notion of human beings that we sometimes equate the two (although Dennett does not). And I take it, it is normal for us to ascribe to human beings second-order Intentions. So the Jones case is abnormal and could be treated as an exception to the rule.

But what of creatures for which it is normal to lack second-order Intentions? Even if they were nonhuman, would we consider these beings to be morally accountable and to possess rights and responsibilities? I submit that we would.

Our creature's name is Grundy. Grundy believes that the world is full of hostile automata who are a threat to him. He wishes to kill them. But the automata he is trying to destroy are human beings. But Grundy does not think of us as Intentional systems, but as machines. This stipulation exists as he has no Intentions about our Intentions.

Grundy is caught and brought to justice. It is at least intuitively plausible to suggest that even if we fail to adopt the stance toward him that he is a second-order Intentional system, we would hold him accountable for his wrong-doings. Pre-analytically there is nothing irrational per se in this supposition. Someone has to pay for his crimes, and he seems the best candidate, having committed them.

And yet if it were a necessary condition for our holding Grundy morally accountable that we ascribe to him second-order Intentions, it would not be reasonable for us to suppose we can blame him. In fact, we, it seems, would not even recognize him as a being that we could rightfully hold responsible for his actions. If Dennett is right, we would not consider him a person, and the question of his guilt or innocence is closed. It would be as mistaken to suppose he had ethical responsibilities as it would to hold that of any non-person, e.g., an adding machine. So either Dennett is wrong, or our ethical intuitions about the conditions of punishment are. This is also shown by the following.

How is Dennett to account for our notions of strict liability? There are times in which we blame or punish an agent and the question as to whether he has Intentions does not even arise. An employer is liable for damages to his employee, whether or not we hold he had any Intention to commit the injury. And in times past, we have held in

the Anglo-American legal tradition that horses were liable for throwing their Masters. And the only consideration was whether the animal in fact did the act, not whether we held that he have second-order Intentions.

Not only do we punish agents we hold lacking in second-order Intentions, we ascribe to them rights and responsibilities. Except metaphorically, we do not think a corporation has Intentions of any kind, yet we give it rights and liabilities. We also praise it when it has done something worthy, and blame it when it has done something reprehensible.

So given our ordinary ways of ascribing moral personhood, i.e., of holding an agent accountable with rights and responsibilities, the question of whether or not we hold the agent to be a first-order, much less a higher-order Intentional system, is irrelevant. So we pay a high price, if we accept Dennett's view over our ethical intuitions, for we will have to substantially revise our ordinary notion of moral personhood. And even if we are willing to do this, it remains a fact that Dennett has not explicated our concept of a person, but rather legislated it.

So it seems from the above that Dennett is wrong in thinking that an Intentional stance which ascribes second-order Intentions to an object is a necessary condition of its being, at least in the de dictu sense, a person. For there are some examples in which (a) we adopt a stance toward X that it is morally accountable with rights and responsibilities, thereby, on Dennett's view, constituting it as a person, and (b) we fail to adopt the Intentional stance that the same X have second-order Intentions.

But let us suppose that the above objections are not sound. Even so, Dennett is in for trouble. For it seems that his criteria for moral personhood may be at once too broad and too narrow.

It would seem that it is simply a matter of attitude whether an object is an Intentional system in the de dictu sense. That is, the question as to whether the thing really has Intentions or not is, in some crucial way, irrelevant to its being a person in this sense. Partly this is because the concept of Intentional system is normative, that is, no object may in fact make the grade and be one. So if the factual nature of an object were relevant to our ascriptions of personhood, we would, if we did the rational thing, suspend judgement on whether anything was a person. But for Dennett it is not rational to so refuse to judge. So the factual nature of the objects cannot matter to our adopting the Intentional stance.

Whether we behave toward an object as if it were an Intentional system is, then, in the de dictu sense, constitutive of its being an Intentional system. But then, why cannot we justifiably ascribe second-order Intentions to subhuman animate objects? It seems we can of some, for we do so, or fail to do so ad libitum for dogs, cats, even trees and ivy plants. But then, why cannot we do so for some inanimate objects? For Dennett, we in fact do so in the case of computers. We can also think of examples from our daily lives. I blame my typewriter for intending to cause me grief by making errors. I ascribe to my car when it fails to start intentions to anger me. And for Dennett, I am justified in doing so, if it helps me explain or predict the actions of my typewriter or automobile.

This illustrates again that it cannot matter, for Dennett, whether the object in question is de re a higher-order Intentional system. It seems utterly dotty to suppose the car and the computer have second-order Intentions. For another thing, such ascriptions seem to violate Occam's Razor. That is, I can account for the erratic behavior of my car, or the chess-playing behavior of my computer simply by the laws of mechanics. So since to suppose the objects really have Intentions adds unnecessary entities to my ontology, I am obliged, by the principle of economy, to reject that supposition.

And what of second-order volition? This is simply a special case of ascribing second-order Intentions. Although we cannot say, thereby, that the same license applies here (that would be the fallacy of division), it seems equally plausible, on Dennett's view, to ascribe these volitions to the same class of objects that we have ascribed second-order Intentions too.

At least we can ascribe second-order volitions to inanimate objects. My television goes on the blink. Now, I know that certain sonic vibrations can bring about the set's return to good order. I also know that these sonic vibrations will be set off by an angry tone of voice and the sounds of my saying "You'd better shape up or else." (This is electronically feasible.) But instead of this mechanistic interpretation, I explain the phenomenon by the following.

I think that the television intends to upset me by going on the blitz. But it knows by the tone of my voice that I am angry and will intend to harm it, if it does not shape up. It desired that its wishes upset me, but it is sorry and changes. This explanation does the following: a) it ascribes second-order Intentions to the television (It knows I am angry), b) it ascribes second-order volition to the set (It desired that its wishes upset me),

c) it predicts the television's behavior. So Dennett would have to say the ascription of second-order Intentions and volitions is proper for at least some inanimate objects.⁵

But we can force Dennett to say that we are able to, with propriety, adopt⁶ a higher-order Intentional stance toward all objects. This is to say the following: By "higher-order Intentional stance" I mean any attitude which ascribes higher-order Intentions, namely, at least first-order Intentionality, reciprocity, and second-order volition, to an object. We know that for Dennett we are justified in taking a higher-order Intentional stance toward an object if we can, using higher-order Intentional predicates, predict or explain its behavior. That is, if we can give a teleological explanation with predictive value of a thing's behavior in terms of first and second-order Intentions and volitions, then we can properly adopt the higher-order Intentional stance toward that object. But arguably we can so understand the behavior of any object. The above examples indicate at least some inanimate object's behavior can be explained teleologically, and it seems entirely arbitrary to exclude from the possibility of higher-order teleological explanation the behavior of any class of objects.

How do we explain or predict the behavior of physical objects? We try to show that the behavior is an instance of an observed law-like regularity. For example, we notice that when two objects are contiguous, the one with the greater mass will attract the one with the lesser. We explain or predict this phenomenon on the basis of the law-like regularities which we call the laws of gravitation.

But such law-like regularities are describable teleologically. For example, "When two objects in space love each other and are self-aware of the feeling, they will intend to please each other by varying the gravitational attraction inversely with their distance and directly with their mass." And any time we witness the statistical or constant conjunction of event A with event B, we are licensed to predict the latter given the former. But we can equally well predict event B by talking of its self-conscious love of event A and its desire to please the latter. Evidence of these feelings is, of course, the fact that the two events are frequently or always, like two friends, contiguous.

By parity of reasoning, any time we observe regularities, we can rephrase the predictions they license in terms of higher-order Intentional predicates after the manner I have just suggested. And since we can explain and predict the behavior of objects in terms of these

rephrased assertions, and, in principle, all natural events, then we would accordingly be warranted in taking the higher-order Intentional stance toward any of them. We should remember that the use of Intentional predicates does not have to make for the best, but only a possible explanation to license our taking the appropriate stance toward the thing explained.

Nor can Dennett reply that I am overlooking a crucial consideration in the propriety of adopting a higher-order Intentional stance, namely, Morgan's Law of Parsimony. The latter would mandate that we ascribe de re only those Intentions to a thing needed to account for its behavior. This is one reason why factually no object may be an Intentional system, as we can, in principle, have a mechanistic, i.e., one which avoids all Intentional ascriptions, account of any object's behavior including that of ourselves.

Now, suppose Dennett were to say, as he sometimes seems to, that we should also avoid taking an n-order Intentional stance toward an object when the simplest explanation which accounts for its behavior only need involve n-1 Intentions. That is, we should only adopt the stance that X is a higher-order Intentional system if higher-order Intentional predicates are not just a possible way but are necessary to account for X's behavior. And so, seeing as natural objects can be accounted for mechanistically, we would not, contra my point, be justified in treating them as Intentional systems.

Given the real possibility of omnipresent mechanistic explanations of human behavior, it may turn out that not only factually may there be no persons, but we may not even be justified in considering an object to be a person. But then we could be mistaken in even adopting the stance that we are persons, i.e., we might not even be right in thinking that we can talk about ourselves as persons. And I think Dennett would find this an unacceptable conclusion. So it seems the law of parsimony cannot prescribe the kind of Intentional stance we take toward an object.

And it cannot be that we would be mistaken in any of our higher-order Intentional ascriptions, for whether the object is de re a higher-order system is seemingly as irrelevant here as the analogous consideration was for lower-order Intentional systems. What would make the difference for Dennett? And what other rightful restraint could there be in ascribing the status as a higher-order Intentional system to an object, other than the one that the ascription is false, because the object de re is not a higher-order Intentional system?

So it seems Dennett is committed to saying that the class of objects we consider higher-order Intentional systems is, in principle, co-extensive with the universal set. That is, it seems that we can justifiably adopt the higher-order Intentional stance toward any object.⁸

Now, this has several problems. It would seem counter-intuitive, if not plainly false, to say it is simply a matter of attitude, as distinct from a matter of factual considerations, whether I am correct in ascribing, e.g., to my car, the attributes of being a higher-order Intentional system. Now, it is true, we ascribe higher-order Intentionality to many inanimate objects, but we often do not really believe we are right in so doing. When I rail at my shoes for willfully hiding from me in order to cause me grief in the morning, I recognize that I am being childish and mistaken. My shoes do not really want to hurt me; their behavior is explained by mechanistic laws. When we ascribe Intentional predicates to objects, even when it helps us understand them, we generally intuitively feel that the more appropriate interpretation is mechanistic.

How can we account for this intuition that Intentional ascription is inappropriate for some classes of objects, unless it very much matters to the appropriateness of my Intentional ascription whether the object is de re an Intentional system? If this is so, my attitude toward whether an object is an Intentional system needs justification and is not, seemingly, in itself constitutive of the object's personhood. I need to know that the object really is an Intentional system. That is, when we ascribe Intentional predicates, we are not using the de dictu sense of "being an Intentional system"; we use instead the de re sense.

On Dennett's view, then, we reach the wildly counter-intuitive conclusion that we are right in ascribing higher-order Intentionality to any object. We would be perfectly correct, right, or justified in saying of any stone, tree, liquid, etc., that it has higher-order Intentions.

But what if Dennett were to abandon his belief that stance alone is constitutive of a thing's being a higher-order Intentional system? And what if he were to say that we are only right in ascribing Intentions to those objects which, in a factual or de re sense, really have them? Then his necessary conditions for higher-order Intentionality do not provide too broad a criterion for higher-order Intentionality, but too narrow a one. Since persons are higher-order Intentional systems, and there may be, on Dennett's view, none of the latter,¹⁰ if an object can only be a person by really fulfilling Dennett's

conditions of personhood, then there may be no persons. In fact, he introduced stance as constitutive of what I have been calling de dictu personhood to avoid just this situation.

I take it that it is not possible for us to be mistaken that there are, in some sense, persons. It seems unimaginable that I am not a person, and the same would presumably apply to my readers. Dennett even agrees to that.

And at the very least, our pre-analytic inclination is to say a theory of personhood is false which has as its conclusion that we may be mistaken about our own personhood. We would not ordinarily be inclined to say that the theory is true, and that we possibly are not persons, or that we cannot know that we are such, as all the evidence is not in (namely, knowledge of future advances in science). I take it we intuitively believe that if we know anything, we know that we are persons. Nor could Dennett get around this by saying that if his concept proved empty, there would still be metaphysical, but not moral persons. Although this may be true, it is irrelevant. Presumably, our intuitions are that we cannot be mistaken that we are beings which have rights and responsibilities and are morally accountable.

In conclusion, if Intentional stance is constitutive of personhood, then Dennett has mis-characterized the attitude involved. In particular, we need not adopt the stance that an object is a second-order Intentional system in order for us to adopt the stance that it is a person in the moral sense. However, regardless of the answer to the question on how to characterize the stance in which we hold an X to be a person, more than simply stance, at least as Dennett understands it, may be involved. Finally, on Dennett's view, we have a set of conditions for personhood which is either too broad or too narrow. But for all of that, Dennett's attempt to come to a functionalist account of personhood may be of value. But that is the topic for another paper.

University of California, Santa Barbara

NOTES

¹Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, The Identities of Persons (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 175.

²Italics in original, and henceforward will be, unless otherwise stated.

³Dennett will not be able to coherently maintain that only our species is self-aware.

⁴For a further explanation of why there may be no de re persons, see my discussion, page 18 and page 21.

⁵Strictly speaking, Dennett only says that ascription of first and second-order Intentionality is justified by the predictive value of the employed Intentional predicates. But he would be entirely arbitrary in maintaining that ascription of second-order volition, which also has predictive value, is not also justified by its explanatory power.

⁶I should point out that although Dennett thinks his six conditions are not sufficient for personhood, they are sufficient for a thing's being a higher-order Intentional system, at least in the de dictu sense.

⁷An historical note: Aristotelian physics, which described the motion of material objects in terms of volitions, did work. For example, Aristotle predicted the acceleration of objects toward the Earth by their desire to return home. The reason that mechanistic explanations superseded teleological ones historically was due to the former's semantic simplicity. As the reader can see from my examples, teleological explanations are usually semantically more complicated than mechanistic ones. But I am arguing that this is an irrelevant consideration for Dennett, or at least that it had better be such.

⁸The reader may have been puzzled by the following. In my discussion of why Dennett's concept of personhood may be too broad, I talked, not about his conditions of personhood, but about his criterion for higher-order Intentional systems. A critic might say that I have only proved that his conditions of higher-order Intentionality are too broad. But the following observations can be made: (a) persons are higher-order Intentional systems, (b) higher-order Intentional systems are analogues to persons, as they fulfill many of the requirements of

personhood, namely, first-order Intentionality, reciprocity, and self-awareness.

I submit that if Dennett's criterion of moral personhood has as a consequence that every object can be a quasi-person, fulfilling almost all of Dennett's necessary conditions, then it is too broad. And this is what we must face if we accept conditions (1)-(4) and (6) and the fact that applying these criteria to a thing is a matter of stance.

⁹See note 8.

¹⁰That is, there may be no object which de re meets the appropriate description.