

PETER CARRUTHERS

CONCEPTUAL PRAGMATISM*

ABSTRACT. The paper puts forward the thesis of conceptual pragmatism: that there are pragmatic choices to be made between distinct but similar concepts within various contexts. It is argued that this thesis should be acceptable to all who believe in concepts, whether the believers are platonists, realists or anti-realists. It is argued that the truth of the thesis may help to resolve many long-standing debates, and that in any case it will lead to an extension of philosophical method. The paper then briefly considers the concepts of belief and desire as a case-study, and argues for the recognition of the practical reasoner's stance (to stand alongside Dennett's intentional stance), relative to which we should select concepts of belief and desire which are broadly cartesian.

This work is a manifesto. It explains what conceptual pragmatism is, argues for its truth and its wide significance for philosophy and philosophical method, and provides, as a case-study, a conceptual pragmatist approach to the concepts of belief and desire. Once the truth of conceptual pragmatism is recognised, its characteristic questions and arguments should come to form a standard part of the philosopher's armoury.

1. THE THESIS

The conceptual pragmatist (henceforward the c-pragmatist) is one who believes that there are pragmatic choices to be made between concepts. The truth of c-pragmatism is, I shall suggest, almost a truism. But if it is such, it is a profound one, which has somehow escaped general notice.

C-pragmatism should be sharply distinguished from the pragmatist theory of truth. One can believe that there are pragmatic issues concerning which concepts to employ, and yet believe that relative to any concepts which we *do* employ, the truth of sentences involving those concepts will be entirely objective, perhaps even a matter of correspondence with some appropriate aspect of reality. Indeed c-pragmatism is compatible with almost any conception of truth – whether pragmatist, coherence, redundancy or correspondence. Since the thesis only concerns our selection of concepts, it is pretty well

wholly independent of any theory of what truth will consist in once given those concepts.

C-pragmatism should also be distinguished from the doctrine of conceptual relativism, criticised by Davidson.¹ Although both doctrines hold that there may exist alternative conceptual schemes, Davidson's c-relativist understands these alternatives to differ so radically from one another that they are not even inter-translatable. I intend something a great deal more modest, namely that there can be schemes of classification whose basic terms are different from ours. Nor, when I say that the choice of conceptual schemes is pragmatic, do I envisage selection of a total conceptual scheme from a range of alternatives, least of all by a being who at present possesses no concepts whatever. Rather, the pragmatic selection is to be made piecemeal. From our standpoint in our conceptual scheme (whatever that is) we can frame concepts alternative to some of those which we presently employ, which might better subserve our purposes in employing concepts of that sort. Note, moreover, that I do not insist that all of our concepts possess alternatives. I allow that there may be transcendental arguments showing that any conceptual scheme whatever must possess such-and-such a concept.

The earliest exponent of a version of c-pragmatism known to me is C. I. Lewis.² However, his interest in the doctrine is entirely epistemological. So although he gives a general statement of the thesis that concepts are to be selected pragmatically, he never considers any other point of view from which one might wish to make such a selection besides the scientific. Moreover, the only pragmatic considerations he mentions to guide our selection are the general ones of simplicity and economy, together with the desire to find an intelligible order in experience. These are serious weaknesses. For if concepts are purpose-relative at all, then it is surely evident that there may be a multitude of different purposes underlying our choice of concepts in different contexts, and in different regions of discourse. Many of these purposes will relate, not to our need to understand the world, but to our status as social agents. We require concepts to employ in our daily social intercourse with other persons, concepts through the use of which we may hope to influence the behaviour of other persons, and so on. It is an essential part of the c-pragmatist doctrine, as I shall henceforward understand it, that the pragmatic considerations which are to determine our selections may be multifarious.

Some contemporary philosophers – notably Dummett, as well as Wright and Kovesi³ – have deployed c-pragmatist arguments at various points in their writings. Perhaps many others have relied upon c-pragmatist premises without realising it. Yet no one has, so far as I am aware, embarked upon any serious investigation and defence of the c-pragmatist approach. Nor has anyone realised the full extent of its possible significance. Now the above philosophers have been influenced by the later Wittgenstein. And it is certainly the case that c-pragmatism is one of the strands in Wittgenstein's stress upon the multiplicity of different language-games, and upon the intimate connection between conceptual schemes and forms of life.⁴ However, it is important to separate out this aspect of Wittgenstein's thought. For it is, I believe, almost wholly independent of his other views, many of which may be found uncongenial.

I shall argue that c-pragmatism is available, in various different strengths, to anyone who can find a place for concepts and conceptual investigation at all. That is to say, to anyone except an extreme Quinean holist. (And even here c-pragmatism may have an analogue, in the claim that some shifts within the web of belief should occur, not in response to the impact of experience, but rather as required by our needs and purposes.) Indeed c-pragmatism is not merely optional. These are strong arguments to suggest that anyone who believes in concepts *ought* to be a c-pragmatist. (I myself believe in the yet stronger thesis that everyone, without restriction, should be a c-pragmatist. For I think that there are strong arguments for believing in concepts. But I shall not pursue this here.) I shall focus, to begin with, upon the platonists since they are likely to prove our most recalcitrant opponents.

2. THE ARGUMENT FOR THE THESIS

The platonists believe that concepts are genuinely existing entities, which exist eternally and independently of the human mind. Can they at the same time accept that it is a pragmatic question which concepts we should employ? Surely they *can* accept this. They can believe both (a) that there are a great many more concepts existing in the platonic heaven than we shall ever have need of, and (b) that our selection of any given concept from the range of similar concepts should depend

upon the purposes for which we wish to employ it. But *must* a platonist believe both (a) and (b)? Let us concentrate upon thesis (a) first, and draw a distinction between that version of platonism which would hold that the meaningful use of a predicate guarantees the existence of a universal, and that version which would not. (For simplicity, let us say that this distinction is between that version of platonism which construes concepts as the senses of our concept-words, and that version which construes them as the referents of those words. But of course a platonist need not accept the sense/reference distinction.)

A platonist who thinks of concepts as something like the senses of our words must surely accept that there exist an almost unlimited number of them, certainly a great many more than we could ever have simple expressions for in our language. For everyone acknowledges that we could have defined our terms differently. Thus we all accept that there are many other ways of dividing up the colour-spectrum besides the way in which we do divide it up. For instance, we could have introduced a predicate 'is bleen' to have the sense of 'possesses a shade of colour somewhere between mid-blue and mid-green'. If our platonists are to deny thesis (a) then they must say that, were we to try to define our terms in one of these other ways, we should end up talking nonsense (i.e., uttering sentences to which no sense has been attached). But this would be absurd. I have just introduced a sense for 'bleen' such that the sentence 'The book on my desk is bleen' not only makes perfectly good sense, but is (as uttered by me, now) determinately true.

Consider then platonists who think of concepts as being the referents of our concept-words. They can intelligibly claim that had we defined our terms differently (had we introduced concept-words with different senses) we should have failed to pick out any concept. On such a view there would be a limited number of concepts, and not all concept-words with legitimate senses would succeed in determining a concept as referent. The world would thus come to us already divided up, in that part of the world – the set of concepts – would do the dividing. And if we were to try to divide it differently, by introducing words with senses which purport to mark a different division, then we should end up failing to make any division at all. Now notice that it would follow from this that assertions made using words defined in one of these other ways would be either false or neither true nor false, because they employed a word which lacks

reference. This is extremely counter-intuitive. For we should surely want to say that many of those assertions – for instance ‘The book on my desk is bleen’ – might be *true*.

Worse still, how would we ever be able to know whether our predicate-senses do succeed in picking out a concept as referent? For as we have just seen, everything may seem to be in order, in that we appear to have concept-words defined in such a way as to fit them to occur in true statements; and yet, undetectably to us it seems, those words may not in fact be capable of figuring in true statements after all. Thus for this kind of platonist the price of resisting c-pragmatism (or rather that strand in c-pragmatism represented by thesis (a) above) would appear to be a new kind of radical scepticism: we cannot know any of our statements to be true, because there is no way for us to know whether or not our concept-words pick out a concept as referent. I take it that the platonist would find this price too high.

But perhaps there is a reply to this argument. For some platonists may say that a predicate-sense will only determine a concept as referent if it succeeds in “carving reality at the joints”.⁵ They may say that concept-words are suitable to figure in true statements only if they correspond to genuine divisions in reality, that is to say, to divisions which would be marked by the terms in the causal laws of a completed science. Then the difficulty of knowing whether or not our statements are true is not necessarily insuperable. It merely reduces to the difficulty of knowing the extent to which we have constructed a true scientific picture of reality. (Note that such a view need not be a version of platonism. It could be held by someone who believes that neither predicate senses nor predicate referents have eternal existence.)

This reply amounts to the claim that we use all concept-words as natural-kind terms. It amounts to the claim that we use our terms with the intention that they should only classify together things which belong together from the point of view of scientific theory. For then if one of our terms fails to carve reality at the joints, it will not correspond to any genuine division in reality (to any concept), and hence will not be suitable to figure in true statements. But this claim is manifestly false. It is obvious that when we classify things as tables, chairs, spices and sports, we are not aiming to classify them in the way that they would be grouped together in a completed science. For our use of these terms subserves interests which have nothing directly to do with the search for scientific understanding. It is equally obvious

that they in fact occur in many true statements. For example, the statement that my office contains three tables is true, despite the fact that the term 'table' does not correspond to any natural kind.

Platonists should thus accept thesis (a), that there is a selection to be made from within the total range of concepts. Must they also accept thesis (b), that the selection should be governed by pragmatic considerations? It seems to me obvious that they must. For if we deny that we are constrained, in our choice of predicate-senses, to mirror the divisions which already exist within reality, then our choice must surely be governed by facts about *us*: our capacities, purposes and interests. If the answer to the question 'Which concepts should we employ?' is not immediately given as 'The only concepts that there are' nor as 'The only concepts suitable to figure in true statements', then it surely has to be 'That depends upon the purposes for which the concepts are to be employed'. And those purposes will, of course, be many and various, varying from context to context.

Few now-a-days are platonists about concepts. A more commonly-held position would be the following. Concepts do not exist independently of the human mind, and more particularly, independently of the existence of human languages. Nevertheless the logical (or "internal") relations between concepts, and between concepts and reality, are entirely objective, existing independently of our awareness (or even possible awareness) of them. Concepts may come into existence as a result of human decisions or conventions, or as a result of a growing up of patterns of linguistic usage. But once a set of concepts has come into existence, then all the internal relations between them already exist independently of our knowledge. (Think for example of some arbitrarily long WFF of the predicate calculus. Are we not tempted to say that it either is – determinately – a necessary truth, or it is not, irrespective of whether it is possible for us to compute its status?)

This position I have elsewhere designated 'logical realism'.⁶ It is obvious that the logical realist should be a c-pragmatist, for essentially the reasons given above. Where platonists must believe that there do already exist many more concepts than we shall ever have need of, logical realists must believe that there *could* exist many such concepts. Given this, they must also believe that the question of which concepts should be brought into existence is a pragmatic one: the answer will depend upon our purposes.

Some, following the later Wittgenstein, are anti-realists about conceptual relations. On such a view not only concepts themselves, but also the logical relations between them, depend in one way or another upon the human mind. There are two distinguishable versions of logical anti-realism. The moderate anti-realist holds only that logical relations depend upon, and cannot out-reach, our human capacities.⁷ So there can be no verification-transcendent truth-values. The extreme anti-realist further holds that what counts as the correct application of a concept depends at every stage upon the way in which speakers are inclined to react in the use of that concept.⁸ Clearly anti-realists of both kinds should be c-pragmatists. For we could have chosen to explain (or define) our concepts in ways other than we have done, and if we had made one of these other choices then we should have gone on to create quite different patterns of use. Given this, it then becomes a pragmatic question which of these competing possible explanations we should give.

It may be worth noting an especially intimate connection between radical anti-realism about internal relations and c-pragmatism. For the radical anti-realist holds that there is a sense in which conceptual connections get created by the way in which speakers respond to their linguistic training. And it seems plausible that a speaker's reactions may be partially determined by their awareness of the purposes lying behind the use of the concepts in question. Then for the radical anti-realist there may be no sharp boundary between the level of concepts and conceptual relations on the one hand, and the level of pragmatic considerations determining the selection of concepts on the other. The pragmatic considerations may enter in at the first level also, helping to determine the conceptual connections.

Dummett is thus partially correct in claiming that it is insufficient for a philosopher who wishes to give an account of a certain concept merely to articulate the conventions governing the use of the corresponding term, since they should also describe the characteristic point of that use.⁹ This is true if, but only if, we are radical anti-realists about conceptual connections. If we are platonists or logical realists or moderate anti-realists, then it is one thing to articulate a certain concept, and quite another to describe the characteristic purpose for which that concept is employed, and to raise the question whether we might be better subserved by some other concept.

I conclude that we should be c-pragmatists irrespective of how we

conceive of concepts and conceptual relations, so long as we are prepared to find a place for them somewhere in our scheme of things. But it remains an open question at this stage whether the truth of c-pragmatism is in any way philosophically important. Some may be inclined to regard it as a mere truism, having no particular significance for philosophy or philosophical method. I take the opposite view, believing that its significance may be very great. In Section 4 I undertake a case-study, sketching how c-pragmatism may bear on a particular philosophical issue. But first some general discussion may be in order.

3. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE THESIS

Let me begin by mentioning a rather specific effect which the acceptance of c-pragmatism should have upon our thinking, which arises naturally out of some of the points made in the last section: it should lead us to oppose a certain sort of conceptual imperialism. Once we are clearly aware of the variety of purposes which may lie behind our different concepts, then we shall be on our guard against various forms of conceptual revision being urged from the point of view of a single – non-exclusive – perspective. It is easy to let a given purpose become so dominant in our thinking that we fail to notice that the choice of concepts is purpose-relative at all, and try to force all concepts into the sort of form best fitted to serve the needs of that adopted perspective. One such purpose, which seems to have become dominant for many philosophers, is that of seeking causal explanations of events in the world. To this end, of course, some schemes of classification are much better suited than others. Yet it is only one end among many, and we do well to remember the fact.

For example, Dennett and others have claimed that it may yet turn out that there are no such things as pains and mental images.¹⁰ Now this would be plausible if terms such as ‘pain’ and ‘mental image’ were used to refer to (putative) natural kinds. For then when the scientists discover, as they may do, that for scientific purposes the phenomena should be classified quite differently, they may appropriately express their discovery by saying ‘There are no such things as pains’. And it might have been entirely appropriate for us to use the terms in this sort of way if our interest in the phenomena had been primarily scientific. Since what we aim at, as scientists, is a set of terms fit to

serve as the terms in the yet-to-be-discovered causal laws of a completed science, what could be more natural than that we should select concepts to which this aim is internal? By 'pain' we would then mean: whatever fits in the same way into the same causal role within a fully explanatory scientific theory as most of *these* events (here a gesture at a range of samples of pain).

But of course there are other perspectives from which mental phenomena can be regarded and classified. There is also the perspective of the subject itself, and of the participator in (as opposed to the observer of) the many and varied forms of social life. From these perspectives we have no motive to employ mental-kind terms as natural-kind terms. On the contrary, for everyday purposes – communicating and interacting with other human beings in society – it is irrelevant what causal structures might underlie mental phenomena.

Others who think that we may be radically in error about our own mental states are apt to stress the fact that terms such as 'pain' get their sense from their role within a loose network of common-sense beliefs about the mind, sometimes called 'folk psychology'.¹¹ This network is said to constitute a primitive scientific theory, which will almost certainly be replaced eventually by others, perhaps of radically different form. It would then be true to say 'There are no such things as pains' just as we now say 'There is no such thing as phlogiston'. But again the mistake is to think that any network of beliefs, and any set of concepts, must be intended as a scientific theory. This mistake would be plain for all to see, were the truth of c-pragmatism generally accepted.

Consider this analogy. We employ terms for classifying different foodstuffs: 'spice', 'vegetable', 'grain', 'pulse' and so on. These terms form part of a loose network of common-sense beliefs and explanations. But it is obvious that this network is not intended as a primitive scientific theory (though it may presuppose a certain amount of low-level scientific knowledge). For we continue to insist that a chili is a spice rather than a vegetable, although we know that it belongs to the same biological family as a green pepper, which *is* a vegetable.¹² This is because our interest in the classifications is not really a scientific one: we classify together things as 'spices' because we think they belong together from the point of view of our interest in taste and cooking, not because we think they belong together from the point of view of scientific theory.

In general then, one significant effect which c-pragmatism should have on our thinking is this: once we are clearly aware of the multiplicity of concepts and the multiplicity of purposes, we shall be able to resist the revisions being urged on us by those for whom science has become dominant. We can insist that many of our beliefs and concepts can remain intact in the face of even radical scientific change. For since those concepts never were intended to be scientific ones, the beliefs involving them can remain true *alongside* the new theories.¹³

Let us turn now to consider the ways in which c-pragmatism may lead us to extend philosophical methodology. One such extension is as follows. Wherever a philosopher has arrived at a belief in a conceptual truth, following the usual methods of constructing intuitively acceptable arguments, thinking up imaginary examples to elicit the appropriate semantic intuitions, and explaining away apparent counter-examples – or wherever philosophers in general have reached agreement about the existence of a particular conceptual connection – there now remains a further question to ask. Namely: is the possession of concepts connected in this way required by the purposes for which we possess them? Since our use (for the logical antirealist) may have gotten out of line with the point of that use, and since our selection of concepts (for the platonist and logical realist) may not have been made with the purpose of that selection very clearly in mind, this is a real question. An investigation of it may lead us to overturn our intuitions, at least in the sense that it leads us to redefine our terms in such a way that we are left with concepts which are not logically connected in the original manner.

For example, it is generally accepted that our concept of personal survival implies identity, with most of the philosophical debate focusing on the question of what constitutes personal identity.¹⁴ Thus 'Mary has survived the operation' implies 'Mary before the operation, and the person who now exists after the operation, are one and the same'. But c-pragmatists will go on from here to ask whether this is the concept which we *should* employ, given the nature of the interest which we take in the survival of ourselves and others. Viewed in this light, I believe it soon emerges that we have been employing the wrong concept: we have been thinking in terms of a concept of survival which implies identity, whereas we ought really to think in

terms of a concept which will allow one person to survive as each of a number of distinct persons.¹⁵

It may be objected that such a concept would not really be a concept of *survival*. This may be true, but is trivial. For in that case what ought to be said is this: we should stop employing the concept of survival altogether, and in those contexts where we would previously have made use of such a concept, we should employ instead this other concept, which is like the concept of survival in all respects except that it does not imply identity.

Of course our investigation of the question whether our concepts are in line with our purposes will more often support the status quo. Even so, we should have gained something important. For we should then be in a position to understand quite why we employ a concept for which the conceptual connection in question holds. I am almost tempted to say that it is only such a higher-order investigation which allows us to discern the *essence* of the concepts in question. (This may be the right way for a radical anti-realist to put it.) More properly we should say that it is only the higher-order investigation which allows us to see which concepts, possessing which essential connections with other concepts, it is important for us to employ.

Perhaps it is more common for philosophers to find themselves without any very firm convictions on a given conceptual issue, beset by conflicting intuitions and arguments. Certainly there are many issues on which there is no unanimity within the philosophical community as a whole, but rather an apparently interminable debate. In this sort of case we should ask: would it be the possession of a concept for which the disputed conceptual connection holds, or rather one for which it does not hold, which would best subserve the point of our possessing such a concept? Supposing that each of the parties is defending a possible concept (their dispute being over which of the two concepts is *our* concept), then one outcome might be a decisive resolution of the dispute on a higher level. For if we could show that it is only one of the two possible concepts which we ought to employ, given the nature of our purposes, then the dispute would, in a sense, have been resolved. For even if it were the other concept which we had in fact been employing, we ought now to cease to do so.

There are many philosophical issues which could fruitfully be approached in this manner. Consider, for example, the debate over the

compatibility of freedom and determinism. At least one aspect of this debate concerns the concept of freedom which is implied by our attributions of blame and moral responsibility. Some say that the relevant concept is of an act which could have occurred otherwise, even had all prior physical facts and laws of nature remained the same. Others say that the relevant concept is of an act which is caused, in some suitable way, by the agent's beliefs and desires. But viewed in this light the dispute is relatively sterile. What matters is not the concept of freedom which we *do* employ as a necessary condition of moral responsibility, but rather the concept which we *should* employ. So the way to resolve the dispute is to investigate the kind of interest which we take in attributions of blame and moral responsibility, giving an account of our main purposes in doing so. I myself believe that an application of the c-pragmatist method will lead to a decisive resolution in favour of the compatibilist. For again, even if we have up until now been employing the concept of freedom which the incompatibilist alleges (or even if the matter is indeterminate),¹⁶ my own view is that it can be shown that we ought now to think in terms of a conception of freedom which favours the compatibilist.

Other issues which c-pragmatism may help us to resolve occur in moral philosophy. For example, consider the debate between contractualists and utilitarians. Supposing that moral discourse is genuinely assertoric, so that terms like 'ought' and 'right' may express genuine concepts, it seems clear that each of the parties to the debate is working with a possible concept. Each possesses a coherent way of classifying actions, and both modes of classification are sufficiently similar to count as moral concepts. The debate is over the extent to which either of them characterises *our* concept of morality (though utilitarians sometimes present their views as being explicitly revisionary).

Here a c-pragmatist will incline to a version of moral relativism: since each of the protagonists is working with a possible moral concept, each may say something *true* when one of them classifies a given action as 'right' and the other classifies it as 'wrong'. Yet we can avoid one of the standard objections to relativism, namely, that there does seem to be a further question as to whether the action is *really* right or wrong. The c-pragmatist will allow that there is indeed such a further question: it is the question of which of the two moral concepts

ought to be employed (where the 'ought' here is not the moral one, but rather the 'ought' of pragmatic selection).

The most fruitful way to approach the dispute between contractualists and utilitarians is the c-pragmatist one. Rather than become involved in a quagmire of intuition-swapping, we should analyse the (non-moral) purposes for which we need moral concepts at all, in order that we may select the concept which is most appropriate to that purpose. (I assume here that non-moral purposes are logically prior to moral ones: if we did not already care about other things, we could not possibly come to care about morality.) I take it that this purpose is, roughly, that we need a concept through the general currency of which we may be enabled to live together in cooperative society. And in my view it is the contractualist concept which is best fitted to this need, though this is not the place to argue it.

A c-pragmatist investigation of any given conceptual dispute will not necessarily lead to a resolution of it one way or the other. For we may discover that there are two or more distinct purposes or interests, relative to one of which we should employ a concept for which the disputed conceptual connection holds, and relative to the other of which we should employ a concept for which it does not. In this case we should have dissolved (rather than *resolved*) the dispute, again at a higher level. For even if one of the parties is right and one wrong about the concept which we do in fact employ, what we ought to do now is deploy two distinct concepts, one in the context of one purpose and one in the context of the other.

Consider for example the question whether or not terms like 'water' are natural-kind terms. That is: consider the question whether 'water' means 'whatever has the same internal constitution as most of *this* stuff' (with a gesture here at a range of samples).¹⁷ Here, as in our earlier discussion of the terms 'pain' and 'after-image', one has only to approach the question as a c-pragmatist to realise that there are two quite distinct purposes underlying our use of the term in different contexts. On the one hand, there is the use of the term in science, when we pursue systematic explanations of events in the natural world. Here what matters is the ultimate internal constitution of the stuff, and the phenomenal characteristics are of no importance. From this perspective there is every reason to use the term with the intention of referring to a natural kind (even if we do not at present do so). But

then, on the other hand, there is the use of the term in everyday life. Here the internal constitution is irrelevant, and what matters are the characteristic phenomenal qualities of water: whether you can drink it, swim in it, do your washing in it and so on. So we ought to employ two distinct concepts, one in connection with the one context and one in connection with the other.

This completes my analysis of the significance of the c-pragmatist thesis. That thesis should incline us, first, to oppose any form of conceptual imperialism, favouring instead some form of regional conceptual autonomy. Second, where we are satisfied that we do in fact employ such-and-such a concept, we should now go on to ask whether it is this concept which we *ought* to employ, given the nature of our purposes. Such an investigation may or may not support the status quo, but is in any case likely to prove enlightening. Third, where there is uncertainty or dispute over the concept which we in fact employ, our difficulties may be either resolved or dissolved by investigating which (if not both) of the candidate concepts are appropriate to our purposes.

These remarks have perhaps been excessively abstract, and my illustrations have no doubt been too sketchy to carry complete conviction. Accordingly I shall, in the next section, undertake a case-study. By discussing a particular issue in a little more detail, I shall hope to show that c-pragmatist questions are at least worth asking, and worth investigating.

4. A CASE-STUDY: BELIEF AND DESIRE¹⁸

Philosophers have tended to fall into two distinct groups in their attitude to beliefs and desires. One school holds that we have incorrigible, if episodic, awareness of them: if I think that I have a certain belief, or a certain desire, then so I do; and if I think that I do not, then I do not. Members of this school are also suspicious of attributing beliefs and desires to non-rational creatures such as dogs and cats. The second school holds that we have no privileged access to our own beliefs and desires. On the contrary, these states may be unconscious, not merely in the sense that subjects who currently possess them are not currently aware of them (a member of the first school may admit this), but also in the sense that they may possess them while sincerely claiming awareness that they do not, and vice versa. Moreover for

members of the second school, it is entirely unproblematic that dogs and cats, and even salamanders, have beliefs and desires.

In my view the doctrines of the first school are certainly too extreme. For there is no such thing as incorrigible awareness of beliefs and desires. Notice to begin with that on any account of the matter, beliefs and desires are dispositional behaviour-determining states, continuing to exist while the subject is no longer aware of them. Thus one may say of someone who is asleep: 'She believes that she has been betrayed, and wants revenge'. More important perhaps, they possess no phenomenological content. It does not *feel like anything* to be aware of a particular belief or desire. In this they are sharply distinct from experiences such as pains or sensations of red. These points combine to make it wholly implausible that we should have incorrigible access to our own beliefs and desires.

Nevertheless a slightly weaker thesis remains possible: it may be that we have *privileged access* to our own beliefs and desires. We may conceive of beliefs and desires as functionally defined states, amongst whose normal effects is the disposition to think that one has that belief, or that desire. It will then be a logical truth, not that our intuitive beliefs about our own beliefs and desires are always correct (the incorrigibility thesis), but rather that they are normally so (the thesis of privileged access).

With this emendation, each school of thought should concede that the other is operating with a possible concept. The second (non-privileged-access) school should concede to the first the possibility of concepts of self-consciously-held beliefs and desires, with respect to which the claims made by the first school are uncontroversially true. For there certainly exist concepts of belief and desire such that those states normally cause self-conscious awareness of themselves in the subject who has them. And the first (privileged-access) school should concede to the second the possibility of concepts of merely-dispositional beliefs and desires, with respect to which the claims of the latter are uncontroversially true. The dispute between them is best characterised as being over which of these possible concepts is *our* concept. But thus characterised, the dispute is uninteresting. We do better to ask which of these concepts *should* be our concept. And once we approach the matter from this c-pragmatist perspective, we shall discover that both sets of concepts subserve their own distinctive purpose.

The most obvious use for concepts of belief and desire lies in explanations of behaviour, primarily the behaviour of animate organisms. We postulate suitable beliefs and desires for the organism – suitable in the sense of being intelligibly related to the creature’s environment, physiology and biological needs – which enables us, given an hypothesis of (limited) rationality, to make sense of its behaviour, and (within limits) to predict its future behaviour. As Dennett has expressed it, when seeking explanations of this kind we “adopt the intentional stance” towards the behaviour of the organism.¹⁹

Given this use for the concepts of belief and desire, we shall want to employ concepts such that dogs and cats (and even computers) may unproblematically be said to possess the corresponding states. Neither is there any particular reason to employ concepts such that human beings will have privileged access to their own states. Of course sincere claims (whether by oneself or someone else) to have a particular belief or desire will fall within the scope of behaviour which we seek to explain from the intentional standpoint. And often the simplest explanation of this piece of behaviour will involve ascribing to the speaker the corresponding state. But it is left open that there may be whole classes of beliefs and desires which are unconscious, where the simplest overall explanation may involve ascribing to the speaker both the belief or desire, and the persistent belief that they do not possess any such state.

However there is quite another use for concepts of belief and desire, which is not explanatory but *active*. We not only use attributions of belief and desire in explaining and predicting the behaviour of agents (including ourselves), we also use (what we take to be) our beliefs and desires in practical reasoning, in *working out what to do*. Now the standpoint of the practical reasoner is, and must be, distinct from that of someone who adopts the intentional stance. For one thing it is impossible to reason practically about the past, whereas of course past actions fall within the explanatory scope of the intentional standpoint. For another thing, there may be difficulties in principle about predicting one’s own future actions, whereas there are no such difficulties about arriving at a decision (e.g., where one of one’s desires is the desire that one’s own predictions should, or should not, be fulfilled). But most obviously, the attitude of mind of one who is trying to arrive at a decision is quite different from that of someone trying to make a

prediction. For decisions are apt to cause their objects: someone who has decided to do *E* is (necessarily) in a state which is apt to cause them to do *E*. Predictions, however, are not apt to cause the predicted events: where my prediction that I shall do *E* is fulfilled, the act will not normally have been caused by my prediction itself, but rather by the beliefs and desires which formed the evidence on which my prediction was based.

So alongside Dennett's intentional stance, and distinct from it, we may set the *practical reasoner's stance*. These give us two quite different perspectives from which to deploy concepts of belief and desire. And when someone is engaged in practical reasoning they have no use, in general, for the idea of beliefs and desires not available to consciousness, nor for the idea of beliefs and desires which they falsely believe themselves to possess. A practical reasoner, in the act of considering what to do, can only work within the circle of beliefs and desires available to consciousness at that time. So when we adopt the practical reasoner's stance, the basic concepts we require are those of self-consciously-held belief and desire.

However, this is not to say that the practical reasoner can find no use whatever for the concepts of merely-dispositional belief and desire. For it is possible to believe oneself to have a certain (unconscious) desire without consciously desiring that thing. In which case that desire might, after all, enter into one's practical reasoning. For instance, reflecting on my behaviour over a period of time (and adopting the intentional stance towards myself) I might conclude that I apparently desire career-success more than I desire anything else. I may then decide not to enter into some personal commitment which I had been considering, on the grounds that I shall very likely not be able to carry it through. But notice that my unconscious desire for success does not enter into my practical reasoning here *as* a desire. Rather it only enters in *qua belief* about myself. The only desires which can enter into practical reasoning *as* desires are self-consciously-held ones.

Something similar is true of the way in which an unconscious belief might enter into practical reasoning. If I come to believe, after a period of self-observation, that I believe myself to be socially inadequate (without consciously believing any such thing), then it will not be the unconscious belief itself, but rather the belief that I have such a belief, which will enter into my practical reasoning. So to

repeat: a practical reasoner can, as such, work only within the circle of self-consciously-held beliefs and desires.

The practical reasoner's stance may be taken not only in the first-person, but also in the second. When we reason with someone – when we try to persuade that person to make one decision rather than another – we adopt the stance not of the intentional explainer or predictor, but of the practical reasoner. Again we can only work within the circle of beliefs and desires which our co-reasoners consciously possess, and what we try to do is construct on that basis some practical arguments for the decision we want them to make.

When we adopt the intentional stance towards other people, we in a sense treat them as *objects*: complex systems whose behaviour we seek to explain or predict. But when we interact with other persons – when we argue or discuss with them – then we treat them as *subjects*, and have to try to see their beliefs and desires from their point of view. So, relative to the practical reasoner's stance, we have no reason to employ concepts of belief and desire such that anything other than a self-conscious, rational (reasoning) agent can possess beliefs and desires. And since it seems unlikely that dogs and cats enter into any self-conscious process of practical reasoning (certainly we cannot *reason with* them) it is likely that, when judged from the practical reasoner's standpoint, they do not possess any (self-consciously-held) beliefs or desires.

Since the two pairs of concepts are not even co-extensive, let alone logically equivalent, it is perhaps tendentious to describe them both as 'concepts of belief and desire'. But they resemble one another sufficiently closely to make this an entirely natural way of talking. For both are mental representations possessing intentional content. And both are behaviour-determining states. (Indeed the whole business of practical reasoning is only possible at all because our self-consciously-held beliefs and desires are almost always also dispositional behaviour-causing ones.) The only difference between them comes with the phrase 'which normally causes the subject to be disposed to think that they are in that state'.

Although, for a c-pragmatist, the question of the concepts which we actually employ is not of primary interest, it does seem likely that we use *both* pairs of concepts of belief and desire without being very clear about the difference. And this may help us to understand one aspect of the traditional problem of weakness of will. For corresponding to the divergence in the concept of desire will be a divergence in the concept

of strength of desire. On the one concept we will have at least privileged access to the strength of our desires, whereas on the other, relative strength is a matter of relative causal efficacy. Now one kind of weakness of will arises where one's strongest desire (subjectively judged) is not the desire which leads to action (not being one's strongest desire as judged from the intentional standpoint). If we shift unwittingly between the two concepts of desire (especially if we employ a concept of self-consciously-held desire which implies not only privileged access but also incorrigibility), then we shall be tempted to ask 'How *can* my strongest desire not be the desire which leads to action? How is it *possible* to act against my better judgement?'

NOTES

* I am grateful to the following for their help (varying from detailed comments and criticisms on earlier drafts, to general advice and encouragement): David Archard, Simon Blackburn, Jack Copeland, Dan Dennett, Susan Levi, Christopher McKnight, Derek Parfit, Michael Slote, Tim Williamson, and Crispin Wright.

¹ In Davidson, 1974.

² See Lewis, 1929.

³ See Dummett, 1959 and 1960; Wright, 1975 and 1980 (especially Chap. 4.); Kovesi, 1967. See also my 1983, 1984b and 1986.

⁴ See Wittgenstein, 1953, particularly Sections 558–70.

⁵ See Plato's *Statesman* 262, and Armstrong, 1978.

⁶ See my 1981, 1984a and 1985.

⁷ Dummett has defended moderate anti-realism in many places, for instance in his 1976.

⁸ Wright has defended extreme anti-realism, most notably in his 1980.

⁹ See Dummett, 1978, p. 3.

¹⁰ See Dennett, 1979, pp. xix–xx.

¹¹ See Churchland, 1979.

¹² I have been told that this use of the term 'chili' is correct only in England. American readers should perhaps re-read the example substituting 'serrano chili'.

¹³ For further discussion of this material, see my 1986, 4.iv.

¹⁴ The notable exception of this consensus being Derek Parfit; see his 1971 (although perhaps Parfit is best interpreted as a c-pragmatist).

¹⁵ I have argued this in detail in my 1986, Chap. 7.

¹⁶ As has been argued, for instance, by Peter Unger. See his 1984, Chap. 3.

¹⁷ This question was first raised by Hilary Putnam. See his 1975.

¹⁸ The ideas expressed in this section bear some resemblance of those of Dan Dennett in 'How to Change Your Mind' (Dennett, 1979). But Dennett thinks he has discovered an incoherence in our concept of belief (see Dennett, 1979, p. xix.) whereas I think that we very likely employ two distinct concepts.

¹⁹ See Dennett, 1971.

REFERENCES

- Armstrong, D. M.: 1978, *A Theory of Universals*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Carruthers, P. M.: 1981, 'Frege's Regress', *Aristotelian Society Proceedings New Series LXXXII*, 17–32.
- Carruthers, P. M.: 1983, 'Understanding Names', *Philosophical Quarterly* **33**, 19–36.
- Carruthers, P. M.: 1984a, 'Baker and Hacker's Wittgenstein', *Synthese* **58**, 451–79.
- Carruthers, P. M.: 1984b, 'Fragmentary Sense', *Mind* **XCIII**, 351–69.
- Carruthers, P. M.: 1985, 'Ruling-Out Realism', *Philosophia* **15**, 61–78.
- Carruthers, P. M.: 1986, *Introducing Persons: Theories and Arguments in the Philosophy of Mind*, Croom Helm, Beckenham, and SUNY, New York.
- Churchland, P. M.: 1979, *Scientific Realism and the Plasticity of Mind*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Davidson, D.: 1974, 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* **47**; reprinted in Davidson, 1984, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Clarendon, Oxford.
- Dennett, D. C.: 1971, 'Intentional Systems', *Journal of Philosophy* **LXVIII**, 87–106, reprinted in Dennett, 1979.
- Dennett, D. C.: 1979, *Brainstorms*, Harvester, Brighton.
- Dummett, M. A. E.: 1959, 'Truth', *Aristotelian Society Proceedings New Series LIX*, 141–62; reprinted in Dummett, 1978.
- Dummett, M. A. E.: 1960, 'Oxford Philosophy', *Blackfriars* **XLI**, 74–80; reprinted in Dummett, 1978.
- Dummett, M. A. E.: 1976, 'What is a Theory of Meaning? (II)', in G. Evans and J. McDowell (eds.), *Truth and Meaning*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 67–137.
- Dummett, M. A. E.: 1978, *Truth and Other Enigmas*, Duckworth, London.
- Kovesi, J.: 1967, *Moral Notions*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.
- Lewis, C. I.: 1929, *Mind and the World-Order*, Charles Scribner, New York.
- Parfit, D.: 1971, 'Personal Identity', *Philosophical Review* **80**, 3–27.
- Putnam, H.: 1975, 'The Meaning of 'meaning'', in K. Gunderson (ed.), *Language, Mind and Knowledge*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis; reprinted in Putnam, 1975, *Mind Language and Reality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Unger, P.: 1984, *Philosophical Relativity*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Wittgenstein, L.: 1953, *Philosophical Investigations*, G. Anscombe (trans.), Blackwell, Oxford.
- Wright, C.: 1975, 'On the Coherence of Vague Predicates', *Synthese* **30**, 325–65.
- Wright, C.: 1980, *Wittgenstein on the Foundations of Mathematics*, Duckworth, London.

Department of Philosophy
 University of Essex
 Wivenhoe Park
 Colchester CO4 3SQ
 U.K.