

## Notes for the abecedaire seminar presentation, 30th October 2015

### Cunning (notes, thoughts, speculations)

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#### 1) *Cunning is to be understood via a tension*

between it's existence as:

- a. the use of practical (non-monotonic) inference - 'sapient activity'
- b. the skillful adaptation to an environment (possibly *via occultation behaviour*) - 'mechanistic activity'

Cunning lies at the borderlines of the sapience/mechanism distinction. It is both an entirely 'mechanistic' (algorithmic) process and a key form of primitive 'sapience' (inferential)

(ASIDE: This same combination between algorithmn and inference is what underlies the current fondness for the 'Bayesian Brain' model of cognition).

The tension at the heart of any understanding of cunning comes from it containing a mixture of intentional and non-intentional factors.

*Dennetts 'Intentional Stance' as an example of the tension* - (hidden role of myth)

An example of this tension can be found in Dennett's proposal of an 'intentional stance'. There's a kind of 'algorithmn' for getting into the Intentional Stance:

- 1. treat X (X = Object With Behaviour That Needs Predicting) as rational agent
- 2. assign set of beliefs to that agent - on basis of place and purpose in world
- 3. assign set of desires to that agent - on basis of place and purpose in world
- 4. assume (per 1) that X will act to further its goals (desires) given its beliefs

From this, and from “a little practical reasoning”, prediction of action should be possible, and *explaining this capacity to predict* is the purpose of the Intentional Stance argument.

The crux of the Intentional Stance argument is that the best way to understand human behaviour is at this level of intentions, above the physical and design levels of abstraction, and yet to understand the human as ‘intentional’ it is not important whether they *actually intend anything*. This is the heart of the ‘Zombie’ problems - if there’s no ‘thought’ and it’s only ‘there’ because we ‘behave as if’ there is such a thing as a thought content, then why bother? The difference that makes a difference, in this case, is *the ‘operation’ of the Intentional Stance itself*. But isn’t it an ‘as if’ operation, thus, essentially, a *story-telling operation*.

Dennett rejects the ‘philosophical zombie’ as a fiction, which it may well be, but the tension lies not in the zombie moment per se but in this odd story-telling activity that constitutes the way of operating the Intentional Stance - why one story rather than another, we might ask?

(The response will be ‘evolution’ all the way down, the Naturalism response).

*Myth and story.*

Dennett argues, in his essay ‘Three kinds of intentional psychology’, that “*we treat each other as if we were rational agents, and this myth — for surely we are not all that rational — works very well because we are pretty rational*”. This assumption (this myth) plus “a little practical reasoning” and a few “home truths about our needs, capacities and typical circumstances” yields *predictivity with regard human behaviour*.

The myth or story is here ‘put to work’ and it often seems like we’re supposed to return a little dignity to the myth or story once we have successfully ‘put it to work’, as though we’ve overcome it’s highly problematic and potentially nihilistic nature as ‘fiction or fantasy’ (nihilistic in its’ capacity to convert the apparently real into the real apparition if left to proliferate in its power).

2)

Cunning is a curious thing, both animal and human and neither-nor. The Greek concept of 'metis' speaks to a kind of practical knowledge, something local and unable to be transmitted universally and often translated as cunning<sup>1</sup>. The relationship between knowledge and cunning is one that intimately connects with questions of ethics and most of the discussion around this concept focuses on the kinds of understanding that might be gained by positioning cunning in different determinate relationships to knowledge, sometimes supportive and necessary, other times verging on undermining the very purpose of knowledge itself. The epistemological problem of cunning is that it appears entirely instrumental, functional and in some sense 'outside' knowledge. Cunning is an occultation at its very heart and so the transparency assumption that underpins most naive epistemologies, that is, that if something can be known it can be known clearly enough to be communicated with clarity, short-circuits when it encounters cunning. Whilst the *place* or *situation* in which cunning appears can be described, cunning itself sits like some sort of dark weight to one side of true knowledge. This dark, occulted aspect of cunning often speaks to its animal side, to its instinctive nature and to something atavistic in the human.

In itself cunning suggests something missing in any model that needs reason or knowledge to be bound together with something like universally transmissible discourse. At the same time it crosses over with the masters of suspicion in that cunning is both something that might be *deployed* by an agent as well as something that *constitutes* an agency. To be more exact, cunning is something that seems necessary, although not sufficient, for agency to appear. This can be understood through an analogy with lying. To have grasped an adequate use of language a speaker must know not only *what* a lie is but also *how* to lie. They might be rather poor in their execution of the lying operation ('you're a terrible

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<sup>1</sup> One of the central texts in the longstanding interest in 'metis' is Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*; Chicago, 1991. A fascinating comparative analysis of Greek and Chinese cognate conceptual arrangements of 'metis' and 'knowledge' is offered by Lisa Raphals, *Knowing Words*; Cornell 1992. Metis is also important, albeit negatively, in Martha Nussbaum's discussion of tragedy, moral luck and excellence in her book, *The fragility of goodness*; Cambridge 1986.

liar, I always know when you're lying') but they must still know that lying is a matter of context, expectations, body language and various other complex assemblages of interaction, as well as the simple dissembling of explicit meaning. Without this knowledge of *how to lie* the agent will not only be unable to actually lie even though they understand the concept, they will also fail at a huge range of other fundamental social relationships such as tact, compassion, politeness and general sociability techniques such as small-talk. To be able to speak is constituted by being able to lie, as a necessary but not sufficient condition of speaking. Analogously, to be able to con (to be cunning), is a necessary but not sufficient condition for conscious agency. It is inconceivable that an agent could, in principle, not be cunning. To be a conscious agent is to be conceived as capable of cunning, although to be conceived as capable of cunning does not constitute agency.

Therein lies the rub because if this is the case it is not because cunning is dependent on conscious agency, as witnessed by the cunning animal who may be sentient but is not sapient. The cunning acts of an animal *imply* something like sapience, yet they push us to anthropomorphise an animal more than almost any other behaviour. Sapience, however, does not necessarily imply cunning. Sapience is also not enough for agency, it is another necessary but not sufficient condition. The sapient individual without cunning is the naive and when that naivete extends far enough it becomes socially pathological, in that the individual lacking cunning but with sapience is prey for any individual with both and is, in effect, no longer capable of agency in the face of such a combination<sup>2</sup>.

Cunning thus appears as a force outside the human but bound into its dreams and desires. Cunning appears in the negotiation of forces and brings insight through deception. It orients the cunning one to an alternative future and opens the eyes of the other to be seen through, albeit only through inference. It is this *opening of inference* in the realm of the practical that lies at the heart of cunning and which is the root of its intimate connection to conscious agency. Inferences in the realm of the practical take the

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<sup>2</sup> A similar point is made by Daniel Dennett where he says that "The organism that has no poker face, that communicates states directly to all hearers, is a sitting duck, and will soon be extinct." (D.Dennett, The evolution of why - REF). Whilst Dennetts point rests on an implicit model of inter and intra species competition driving evolution, and whilst the point made above about cunning, lying and agency involves a fundamentally *social* constraint, rather than a 'simple' evolutionary one, the separation between the two realms is neither accepted nor assumed in the argument offered here.

form not of formal logical connection but are instead a combination of material inferences and dispositions to make such inferences. The material inference that 'if Bristol is to the East of Brighton, then Brighton is to the West of Bristol', or 'if I take 100 micrograms of LSD then perceptual judgements over the course of the next 8 hours will be unstable', are specific and context dependent. Technically speaking they are *non-monotonic* inferences. This means that the content of the inferences, not just the form, is what gives them their logical structure.

To be cunning is to be able to *experiment* with the *inferences* of the other, be it the prey or the partner. The cunning one needs those inferences from behaviour A to effect B to be in place in order to experiment with the connections and push the dynamics that drive behaviour in one direction rather than another. (I know that if I make a loud noise the herd of deer will run away, so if I place a trap and then shout so as to *push them into the trap* I deploy a cunning that is grounded in understanding and experimenting with the behavioural inferences at play.)

To be cunning, then, is to be able to experiment with behavioural inferences, including the beliefs that surround human behaviours.

3) Gerald Raunig, *A Thousand Machines*, Semiotext 2010

Raunig connects cunning, via the *machine* to *invention* - and this is done via the figure of Odysseus.

"It is not a coincidence that Odysseus, as a typical machinator, is known not only as *polytropos* and *polymetis* but also by the epithet *polymechanos*. As the inventor of the technical machine and the psycho-social invention of the Trojan horse, he is literally both multiplying cunning and mastering many machines." (p69)

Yet Raunig's next point, is precisely to argue that this is not a feature of Odysseus but rather results from the *machine* itself. Here the argument rests on a connection between invention and the war machine, when Raunig claims that "*nomads ... become war machines, when they develop inventiveness as a specific mode of action and subjectivation*" (p70)

The capacity to invent extends from devices, through stories and into new worlds. The three moments of a capacity to invent,

- 1) capacity or power to invent a device
- 2) capacity or power to invent a story
- 3) capacity or power to invent new worlds

Raunig argues that “*inventio implies the differentiation of the possible into many different world*” (p71)

and we can see that cunning and invention are connected through this shared capacity of the

*activity X (instituting, inventing, creating, opening, enabling, bringing about, conceiving, producing) with regard possible worlds*

4) Self consuming cunning

Both cunning and invention operate with regard ‘possible worlds’ and the reason for this is that both cunning and invention operate via the means of *the degree of reality in the Idea*. The greater that degree the more successful the cunning or invention. The role the machine plays is to *instantiate the degree of reality in the Idea*. The algorithm is in this sense a means by which an Idea can achieve a high degree of reality (the algorithm is a basic machine).

However to be in a fully extended and reciprocal relation of cunning (Kantian universalised) is problematic as such a universalised situation involves an inherent state of *unknowing* in relation to the world. (Everyone is cunning, therefore all goals are hidden, therefore the Intentional Stance - eg - cannot operate because I *simply cannot know the goals of the cunning agent on pain of them no longer being ‘cunning enough’.*)