

REPLY

The good intentions of Colin Evers

D. C. Phillips

School of Education, Stanford University, Stanford, California, U.S.A.

In the short space of a few pages, Dr. Evers intended to pull off a mighty enterprise--to vindicate Quine and a particular form of philosophical physicalism, to put a halt to a whole tradition of research on teacher effectiveness, and to mildly chastise D.C. Phillips. I shall try to show that he has been uniformly unsuccessful.

At the outset it is worth stressing the obvious--intentional language is, as of late November 1983, damnably useful. No doubt there is an inside story to be told about the wonderous states of Colin Evers' neurones, but it would be incredibly complex and not of much day-to-day use. The fact of the matter is that it is simple, and helpful, to talk about his intentions. We could not begin to predict, or understand, his behavior in any other terms. Whatever state his neurones were in, he intended to write a competent piece. He intended not to offend his friends. He intended to establish a particular position. (To succeed in two out of three is not bad.) And so on.

If we have any doubt about these intentions -- if, for instance, it is suspected that he might be a fifth-columnist intending to deliberately present flawed arguments to help the other side win-- then we could hypnotize him, or slip him a dose of truth-serum, before questioning him about what he was aiming at in writing the paper. There can be little doubt that the transcript of such an interview would be more helpful than an enormous (I mean, really enormous) chart depicting the state of his inner circuits. (Note that I have not denied here that there is an inner physicalist story to tell; the point is that it could not be made much use of because it would be overwhelming.)

The position I have adopted here is the one developed by Daniel Dennett in his work on "intentional systems"; although Dennett goes on to couple it with a particular type of physicalism (what he calls "type intentionalism" or "homuncular functionalism") it actually is neutral with respect to a variety of physicalist positions. (So as not to be thought to be a mug-wump, I should affirm that at the moment I lean towards accepting "type intentionalism", but that is another story.) Dennett has an engaging example: various ways of predicting the behavior of a system much less complex (I believe) than Colin Evers, namely, a chess-playing computer. Dennett writes:

The best chess-playing computers these days are practically inaccessible to prediction from either the design stance or the physical stance; they have become too complex for even their own designers to view from the design stance. A man's best hope of defeating such a machine in a chess match is to predict its responses by figuring out as best he can what the best or most rational move would be ... this third stance, with its assumption of rationality, is the intentional stance; the predictions one makes from it are intentional predictions; one is viewing the computer as an intentional system.¹

Dennett points out that it is misplaced to wonder whether the system thus treated really has intentions; the point is that the behavior of the system can be predicted and explained by ascribing intentions to it. If this works -- as in fact it does -- with chess-playing computers, it is likely to work with Colin Evers, and it is likely to work with teachers. Which brings us nicely to the topic of my original paper which Colin Evers was critiquing.

There are only several small points to make:

1. to suggest that, because some form of physicalism is true, we should abandon intentionalist language when studying human action in general and teachers' actions in particular, strikes me as folly. My reasons for believing so have been indicated in the foregoing discussion. Another analogy may clinch the matter: clocks are physical entities, and their behavior can be fully explicated in physicalist language. But, to advocate on this ground that we should abandon "time talk" is silly. Clocks, and time talk, are very useful; it would be much less helpful, when we want to know the time, to be given a complex account of the state of the springs and cog-wheels and so on. "It is twelve-thirty" is much more to the point. And when we want to know what a teacher was trying to do when she look some course of action, the physicalist story would not be as helpful (to put it mildly) as would an account of her intentions.
2. In the article which Evers criticizes, I was not actually enthusiastically advocating intentionalist research on teaching (as indeed Evers realizes). I was, in fact, commenting upon this budding research tradition and attempting to make its supporters a little more cautious and skeptical. But this line of research does have the advantage that it treats teachers as human, which many other traditions of research on teaching have not done; I argued in my paper that too often teachers have been treated as types of automata, who react to environmental influences but who do not think. In this, at least, intentionalist research is to be encouraged.
3. I share much of Colin Evers' discomfort with the notion of intention, as I think my original paper makes clear. But it is unwise, on the basis of discomfort, to predict that a line of scientific inquiry will be fruitless. There must be something more to be discovered about good teaching, and the other research traditions presently being pursued seem particularly unpromising. Who knows what will turn up? And if it comes down to a choice between pursuing the intentionalist program or pursuing the physicalist one, I would have no hesitation in opting for the former (even though I believe the latter to be a true position). I cannot envision any payoff, in the foreseeable future, for physicalist research. How could it help improve teaching? But I can, in wildly optimistic moments, foresee possible benefits from research on teachers' intentions. As they say, you pay your money and you lay your bets.

Notes

1. Daniel Dennett, *Brainstorms*, Montgometry, Vermont: Bradford Books, 1978, pp. 5-6.