
Due on Wednesday Sept. 14, by 12:00 pm (noon).

Please submit your answers using the Dropbox function in Courselink. Assignments should be in MS Word or some compatible format.

Questions

This is in many ways a challenging article to understand. So, it provides an excellent opportunity to develop our skills in reading comprehension, and to practice the technique of argument reconstruction and analysis.

A good place to start when tackling a paper like this is to read the whole thing through first. And then to go through it a second time in more detail. On this initial reading, don’t get hung up on any difficult passages or technical terms. If you encounter things that confuse you, make note of them and keep going. Read up to the end of page 706 (up to where the Postscript begins). Then, answer the following two questions.

1. In one or two sentences, state in your own words what is the thesis that you take Dennett to be defending in this paper.

2. Throughout the paper, Dennett imagines himself engaged in a dialogue with someone who is objecting to his various moves. In one or two sentences, state what you take to be the thesis that Dennett’s imaginary interlocutor is defending.

Now let’s take a second pass through the paper and focus on some of Dennett’s specific argument. On page 694, he mentions the robot Cog. In the second full paragraph on that page (the one beginning with “Cog, a delightful humanoid robot...” Dennett provides an argument.

3. See if you can reconstruct this argument by first stating the conclusion, then state the independent reasons or assumptions that Dennett offers in support of that conclusion. Your answer should only be 3-5 sentences long, including the conclusion.

4. Bonus Question: Try to identify a flaw in the chain of reasoning that you have just reconstructed on behalf of Dennett? For example, explain why the conclusion might not follow logically from the premises, or, identify a reason that someone might doubt one or more of the premises. Your answer should be, at most, a short paragraph.

On page 696, Dennett says, “So, we’re making progress; we now know –to a moral certainty- something about the difference between what it is like to be an African vulture and what it is like to be a Central American turkey vulture.” Answer one of the following in a short paragraph.
5. What is the significance of Dennett’s phrase “to a moral certainty?” That is, what would be an alternative kind of certainty? And why does he opt for this weaker form of certainty?

or,

6. Dennett claims that we have reached a stage at which we can know something about the difference between the experiences of these two species. How exactly did we get here? In other words, what is the chain of reasoning and evidence that provides this knowledge?

On page 699, Dennett complains that, “It has passed for good philosophical form to invoke mutual agreement here that we know what we’re talking about even if we can’t explain it yet. I want to challenge this. Answer one of the following questions.

7. Explain clearly and in your own words, what is the practice that Dennett is complaining about here. Try to generate your own example of the kind of reasoning that Dennett is objecting to. This should take up a short paragraph.

or,

8. Dennett’s challenge proceeds on the next few pages. He imagines how someone might describe the inner conscious life of a whale, and he notes that this involves extrapolation from human consciousness. Then he moves to snakes, and suggests that there is no basis for even supposing that they might possess an inner conscious life at all. In a paragraph or so, explain what exactly is Dennett’s challenge here. For instance, why isn’t it okay to speak of there being “something it is like” to be a snake?