Arts & Humanities Initiative Proposal

Faculty Member (Principal Investigator)
Lyle Zynda
Philosophy Department
1700 Mishawaka Ave.
Indiana University South Bend
South Bend, IN 46634
Phone: (219) 237-6512
Fax: (219) 237-4538
Email: lzynda@iusb.edu

Project Title: Interpretation and Non-Standard Preference Theories

Project Description

A. Summary

The proposed research explores the import of recent non-standard representations of preference, belief, and desire for long-standing philosophical debates over the nature of interpretation and mental content. The anticipated results include one or more publications in peer-reviewed journals. The proposed research is a natural outgrowth of earlier published work (Zynda 1996, 2000).

B. Background

In the late 20th century, many philosophers investigating mental content considered the problem of *radical interpretation*, i.e., specifying the content of a person's mental states (e.g., beliefs and desires) from their (verbal and non-verbal) behavior alone. Prominent philosophers such as Davidson (1984, 1994), Lewis (1974), and Dennett (1987, 1991) produced important work related to this problem. Inspired by the earlier insights of Quine (1960) on a related issue (radical translation), these authors agreed that sensible attribution of beliefs and desires requires that they be somehow mutually coherent or "rational." In other words, describing what mental states people *have* cannot be wholly separated from the issue of what mental states *ought* to be like. In attributions of mental content, the *normative* and the *descriptive* are at some level intertwined.

In their work, many of these philosophers made significant use of *decision theory*, in which a person's preferences are related to their degrees of belief (subjective probability) and desire (utility). The problem is that decision theory is a highly idealized normative theory. Real people do not live up to the high standards of rationality it sets. Thus, standard decision theory cannot (it seems) set the standard for *attributions* of mental content. It has proved difficult to specify precisely more realistic requirements on the level of rationality required for sensible attribution. This remains a problem for the philosophical theory of interpretation.

In the 1980s, several economists and decision theorists, motivated by the perceived descriptive and normative shortcomings of standard decision theory, developed
alternative (non-standard) utility and preference theories that lowered what was required of rational agents (see, e.g., Fishburn 1988 for a summary). To my knowledge, no philosopher to date has investigated systematically how long-standing debates over interpretation and attribution of mental content are affected once these non-standard theories are taken into account.

C. Nature of the Proposed Research

My proposed project will provide a systematic investigation of this issue. If indeed interpretation has built-in normative constraints, then one way of examining the limits of sensible attribution of mental content is to examine precise, formal theories for representing preferences, beliefs, and desires, and to determine their range and limits.

To be specific, let us consider two formal requirements commonly (but not universally) postulated of rational preferences—asymmetry and transitivity. A person’s preferences are asymmetric if the person never prefers A to B and (simultaneously) B to A. They are transitive if whenever the person prefers A to B and B to C, he or she prefers A to C, too. Many philosophers (including myself) would argue for a substantive interpretation of preference that closely relates it to choice dispositions: if a person prefers A to B, then they are disposed to choose A rather than B when offered a choice between the two. (The reverse does not necessarily hold, hence preference does not reduce to choice dispositions. See, e.g., Maher 1993: 12-19.)

Asymmetry seems to be closely linked to the very nature of preference. It makes little sense to say someone prefers A to B and B to A, if this implies that when offered a choice between A and B, they will choose A rather than B and B rather than A. The substantive interpretation of preference just outlined rules this out as an incoherent description. Accordingly, even non-standard preference theories routinely posit asymmetry, despite the fact that some psychological research seems to indicate violations of asymmetry through framing effects (Tversky and Kahneman 1981, 1986). Is this a matter of mere technical convenience, or does it tell us something substantive about the nature of preference? Are plausible and general formal representations of preferences that violate asymmetry possible?

Transitivity is an even more interesting issue. Some philosophers have argued that social preferences or preferences based on multiple attributes can reasonably violate transitivity. Others have argued strenuously to the contrary. The philosophical literature on this dispute is extensive. My research will allow me to approach this question from a new direction, with a new focus: what are attributions of non-transitive preferences coherent? In particular, what do formal theories of non-transitive preferences require? For example, Peter Fishburn’s SSA theory (Fishburn 1988: Chapter 9) allows for non-transitive preferences, but requires that all preferences between options with only two possible outcomes (e.g., “a if S is true, b otherwise”) be transitive. His representation requires this much transitivity. Can a coherent representation exist without any form of transitivity? For another example, Bell (1982) and Loomes and Sugden (1982, 1987) develop “expected regret” theories allowing non-transitive preferences, but these theories conceive of choices as highly context-dependent. In particular, my choices are determined not only by the outcomes options have, but also on whether I would “regret” having chosen one option if things turn out so that the outcome would’ve been better if
I'd chosen the other. Are such representations philosophically plausible as substantive theories about preference?

D. Summary of Arts & Humanities Focus and Significance

The research proposed is well within the mainstream of philosophical work on mental content, interpretation, and the nature of preference. It would contribute to the philosophical literature by bringing new perspectives to long-standing debates on these issues.

E. Required Resources

Since my research is philosophical, time is the primary needed resource. With the support of my department and division, I have applied for a sabbatical for the 2001-2002 academic year to concentrate on the research outlined above, during which I would receive half salary. A grant from the Arts & Humanities Initiative would make up for the difference in salary and would also allow me to travel to consult with philosophical colleagues working on similar projects much more readily than would be the case otherwise.

Office of Research Note: See Calculating Salaries at http://www.iusb.edu/~research/research/salary.html

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Total Project Costs $ $

References