SOCIOLOGY AND THE COGNITIVE SCIENCES
THE SOCIAL STANCE AND ITS RELATION TO INTERSUBJECTIVITY

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1. Program

In this paper, I shall argue that it is sometimes necessary to go one step beyond Dennett’s (1978) three different stances and adopt a social stance to certain phenomena. I shall argue that this stance is necessary for social intentions, which are intentions that cannot be replaced by individual intentions. Social intentions function as causal factors and they are thereby helpful for understanding language and other conventions. I shall then argue that the social stance can only be attained with advanced forms of intersubjectivity (theory of mind) involving social intentions and common beliefs. Among other things, this will explain why humans are the only species to which the social stance applies. Finally, I will argue that there is an interesting mapping between Peirce’s (1932) three kinds of signs and different stances.

2. Dennett’s Three Stances

My first aim is to specify what I mean by the social stance. To do this, I will briefly present the three stances from Dennett’s Brainstorms (1978). The starting point is that a particular thing or system can be described only in relation to the perspective of someone trying to explain or predict its operation. I will illustrate the stances by Dennett’s example of a chess-playing computer. First, there is the physical stance, which considers the computer as a physical object, constructed by various semi-conductors, metal wires, etc. Unless it is malfunctioning, one seldom adopts the physical stance in dealing with a computer, since it would be too complicated to use the physical structure to determine its behaviour. Instead one adopts the design stance, or the functional stance as I prefer to call it. If one knows exactly how the computer is programmed, one can

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1 Sections 2–3 of this article are adapted from Gärdenfors (1994).