

## The Problems of Intentionality

Intentionality is a complex concept, with sometimes ambiguous definitions and usage. Indeed, some philosophers taking instrumentalist positions reject the usefulness of intentionality in describing any phenomenon at all.<sup>1</sup> I first discuss and characterize the concept of intentionality, focusing on the problem of intentionality and its puzzles as they relate to the philosophy of language. I then provide some solutions to problems of intentionality, and objections to these solutions as well. Finally, I address the big problem of how anything can, specifically in language, be ‘about’ anything.

Intentionality is vaguely defined but is mostly considered as meaning “aboutness”. This concept for intentionality today comes from Franz Brentano, who writes that intentionality is “reference to a content, direction toward an object”<sup>2</sup>. Thus, “aboutness” simply means that the object is about something else—we can see the object as pointing towards the thing that it is ‘about’. Thus, most physical objects do not have intentionality, as they are just themselves and not about anything else. For example, a rock is just a rock. On the other hand, most sentences and mental states do have intentionality. Mental states such as happiness and sadness and typically intentional as they are directed towards some object, whether it be a thing, event, or person. Most sentences have intentionality: the intentionality is directed towards the subject of the sentence, e.g., the sentence “Alice would like a pizza” is about Alice. Brentano states that intentionality occurs exclusively in mental phenomena and that intentionality is a defining characteristic of mental states—what he calls “a mark of the menta”. This means that objects with intentionality must be mental phenomena, and mental phenomena must have intentionality<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob, Pierre, "Intentionality", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/intentionality/>>.

<sup>2</sup> Franz Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, (London: Routledge, 2009), 68

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

How do we think about the relationship between the phenomenon that has intentionality and the object it is about? In the original view suggested by Brentano, the latter is simply called ‘the intentional object’ and states that there is a certain ‘intentional relation’ through which the intentionality-haver (sometimes called the intentional state) relates to the intentional object.<sup>4</sup> At this point, we can raise many questions and puzzles of intentionality. In the essay section below, I’ll describe and discuss potential solutions to the following puzzles, as they are all relevant to the philosophy of language. 1) The problem of non-mental phenomena seeming to have intentionality, and seemingly mental phenomena to have. 2) The problem of mental phenomena that seem to not have intentionality 3) The problem of intentionality directed towards nothing/unclear intentional objects. Finally, the trickiest problem of how anything, specifically any sentence, expression, or utterance, can have intentionality at all.

The first puzzle is easy to recognize. In daily life, we often see entirely physical phenomena that have intentionality. For example, the *Mona Lisa* is about the lady Lisa del Giocondo. The intentional object need not be a physical object either—*The Scream* still has intentionality. Many other objects, such as photos, videos, and signs all have intentionality. Furthermore, language is not precisely a purely mental phenomenon as it can exist outside of the mind (for example, a recording of a robot reading a sentence).

The second puzzle is similar to the first puzzle but goes in the opposite direction. There exist many instantaneous mental phenomena or states that do not have intentionality. For example, tactile sensations such as pains and itches are typically thought to not have intentionality, since they are not directed towards anything else.<sup>5</sup> Many other processes that occur and register mentally, such as hunger, thirst, or hotness/coldness are not intentional as

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, 69

<sup>5</sup> Alex Byrne, *Philosophy of Science: An Encyclopedia*, ed J. Pfeifer and S. Sarkar (Routledge, forthcoming)

well. Indeed, it appears that rather than being “the mark of the mental”, intentionality only occurs in higher-level emotions and desires. To further complicate things, not all emotions are necessarily directed towards an object, not even the ones that can be clearly put into words. If Alice says “I am sad because I miss my cat” then it is clear her intentional state of sadness and the intentional sentence is directed towards the cat. But people are very often sad for unclear reasons. For example, when we feel down and someone asks, “What’s wrong?”, we might feel that we can’t put a finger on it.

Finally, the third puzzle is very similar to one of the puzzles considered by Russell. Consider the classic example of the sentence “The king of France is bald”. The sentence appears to have intentionality based on being directed towards the king of France. However, the king of France does not exist, and it does not make sense to have a non-existent intentional object.

Philosophers such as Searle and Haugeland<sup>6</sup> have suggested that we divide intentionality into ‘original’ and ‘derivative’ intentionality to address the first problem. As their names suggest, things with derivative intentionality have intentionality because of some other thing. For example, the intentionality of paintings is derivative of the intentional mental states of their painters, and the intentionality of language is derivative of the intentionality of mental states. After all, if there were no human minds to create signs, paintings, or language, they would not have intentionality (as they would not exist).

To address the second puzzle of mental phenomena not having intentionality, we can similarly introduce a distinction between different kinds of ‘mentality’ (for which Brentano states intentionality is a necessary condition). One method of categorization might be based on the source of the mental phenomena. In the problem description given above, it appears that

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<sup>6</sup> ibid

lower-level, subconscious sensations that are the body's direct reactions to physical stimuli are all not intentional, while higher-level emotions generally have intentionality. Perhaps we can solve the puzzle by considering the source of stimuli. If the sensation is directly tied to the body, perhaps we should not consider it as being mental in the same way as emotions. For example, pricking someone with a pin is guaranteed to cause them to feel pain, and depriving someone of food is guaranteed to make them feel hungry. On the other hand, the object that makes one happy might not make another, and what makes people happy are often abstract achievements or relationships rather than simple physical objects. Thus, hunger and pain are lower-level and bodily, while happiness and sadness are mental phenomena. This leaves the question of object-less intentions such as depression. However, we know that depression does not spontaneously occur in an otherwise happy person. It occurs over a much longer time than other simpler emotions, and there are complex factors (mostly emotional and social) that make someone a victim of depression. Thus, perhaps it is only 'object-less' because find it difficult to identify specific objects for it. The fact that we do not know what someone is depressed about does not mean that he is depressed about nothing—there is still some intentional object(s).

The third puzzle is a little more difficult to resolve. It appears that it cannot be resolved using Russell's decomposition into three conjunctive propositional statements since each of those propositions is still directed towards the King of France. We can perhaps take Strawson's approach to solve this problem i.e., a sentence being *about* the King of France does not necessitate that it is *referring* to the King of France. We can see the intentional object as the concept that is the topic of the sentence, rather than the referent, and it seems acceptable to have a topic that is imaginary or currently does not exist.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> 'We are talking about imaginary things' is intuitively okay, but not 'we are referring to something that does not exist'

I'd like to end by discussing the looming question of how does anything come to be about anything other than itself? As a starting point, we can consider the case given by Byrne of tree rings: he suggests tree rings have intentionality as they are about the age of the tree<sup>8</sup>. But I would like to argue that tree rings have no intentionality. If tree rings have intentionality, then everything else that indicates the age of the tree, e.g., height, thickness, number of cells... would all have intentionality. Then, almost every part of a thing would have intentionality: the shadow of a man is about the man, the size of a lion is about its strength etc. Indeed, intentionality is *not* mere cause and effect; it is wrong to say that the effect is always about the cause because then everything would be about the Big Bang.

We can also further consider the statement that the intentionality of language derives from the mind. While it may seem like the mind has caused language in that we somehow designed language, it is also hard to imagine what the mind would be like *without* language. Indeed, our ability to think *about* things is limited by the things that we have words for, and without words, it is unclear how any thinking would occur at all. Yet, it is also evident that aboutness is not directly tied to any physical property of language, as the same aboutness has different sounds and appearances in different languages, and sign language has no sound at all. Furthermore, objects that are originally not about anything could become about something. Perhaps a grandma's armchair that she passed down is now about your grandma, and a wedding ring is about love or marriage. It seems that we can really make anything be about anything, as long as we agree upon this association. Perhaps aboutness is simply a byproduct of 'thinking' or self-conscious cognition (after all, it is impossible to think about nothing) which is an ability that evolved through the simultaneous development of the mind and language.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid