

## Lecture 1 - The nature of intentionality

### Suggested reading

- Crane (2008) 'Intentionality' (a good introduction; revised edition 2011)
- Anscombe (1965) 'The intentionality of sensation' (at least section 1)
- Brentano (1874) 'The distinction between mental and physical phenomena'

### 1 What is intentionality?

- Intentionality is a philosophical term for the 'aboutness' or 'directedness' of mental states – the fact that some (or maybe all) mental states are *about* things, or represent things. (So it is also called mental representation.)
- Franz Brentano used the term 'intentional inexistence' to characterise what he thought was the essence of the mental. ('Inexistence' here means 'existence-in', not 'non-existence'.)

Every mental phenomenon is characterised by what the scholastics of the Middle Ages referred to as the intentional inexistence of the mental, and what we would call relation to a content, direction upon an object or immanent objectivity...Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself. In presentation something is presented, in judgement something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired and so on. (1874, p.88)

- In other words, for any intentional state  $\phi$ , when a subject is in  $\phi$ , there is always something which is  $\phi$ 'd.
- See Crane (2008) for more on the history of the term and the concept.

Two terminological points to be careful about:

- *Intentionality vs. intention.* Intending is an intentional state – you cannot intend without intending *something* – but intentionality has no special connection to intending.
- *Intentionality vs. intensionality.* The former is a property of mental states, the latter a property of linguistic contexts. A linguistic context is intensional (not extensional) when either or both of the following principles fail to apply:
  - Substitution of co-referring terms: From '...a...' and 'a=b', infer '...b...'
 

E.g. from 'Tom Riddle went to Hogwarts' and 'Tom Riddle = Voldemort', infer 'Voldemort went to Hogwarts'.
  - Existential generalisation: From '...a...', infer " $\exists x...$ "
 

E.g. from 'Ron Weasley is taller than Harry Potter' infer 'There exists someone who is taller than Harry Potter'.
- However, intentionality is related to intensionality: many linguistic contexts which describe intentionality are intensional. See Anscombe (1965), p.4-6 where she lists three important features of intentionality and intentional objects. Because she defines 'intentional object' in grammatical terms, the features listed are really about intensionality, not intentionality.

(Note: I'll use *thinking* as a placeholder intentional state – you can substitute 'S thinks about y' with 'S hopes for y', 'S believes that y', etc.)

## 2 Are intentional states relations?

There are two main problems about intentionality:

- (I) How do we explain thought about the non-existent?
- (II) How do we explain the place of intentionality in the natural or physical world?

These lectures will focus on the first problem, which can be expressed in terms of this inconsistent triad of claims:

- (A) Intentional states are relations between thinkers and the things thought about.
- (B) Relations entail the existence of their relata.
- (C) Intentional states can be about things that do not exist.

These cannot all be true together. Which one should we give up?

- (B) is difficult to give up. Just as a property can only be had by something real, a relation can only hold between real things. Otherwise, we have no reason to think the relation is instantiated at all. (Consider the relation 'to the left of'.)
- (C) is also difficult to give up. It's obvious that we can think about things that don't exist. E.g. fictional characters like Harry Potter, and scientific postulates that turn out to be in error, like the planet Vulcan.
- We are left with (A), but this also seems difficult to deny. When we think about things that do exist, it seems right to say that we are related to those things.
- Perhaps thoughts about real things are relations and thoughts about the non-existent are not? But we should search for a unified theory before considering a disjunctive one (i.e. theory that beliefs are relational *or* non-relational).

## 3 Intentional object and intentional content

These lectures will look at two attempts to solve the problem of non-existence. Both make use of the notion of *intentional content*, which can be distinguished from intentional *objects*.

Let's focus on belief for now. E.g. S believes that George Eliot wrote *Middlemarch*.

- The intentional object of the belief is what the belief is about. S's belief is about the author called George Eliot, who was also called Mary Anne Evans.
- The intentional content of the belief is what S believes. S's belief represents the author *as* George Eliot, who wrote *Middlemarch*. The content can be expressed as the proposition 'George Eliot wrote *Middlemarch*'.
- When reporting some intentional states like belief, you cannot only report the intentional object, or what the state is about. You must report the content, how the object is represented by the state.

Next week we'll take a closer look at the notion of intentional content, and the view that intentional content is propositional.

Li Li Tan  
llt27@cam.ac.uk