

Intentionality and the Language of Appearance

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The modern concept of intentionality originates from the phenomenological movement initiated by Franz Brentano and his followers. According to these authors, intentionality is basically a feature or structure of phenomenal consciousness. This characterization is diametrically opposed to how intentionality is described by contemporary philosophers. The philosophers of mind in the second half of the 20th century have devoted much effort to dissociating intentionality and phenomenal consciousness. On this view, intentionality is that part of the mind of which an objective explanation of the kind used in the natural sciences is possible, while phenomenal consciousness (unless it is itself representational) is bound to remain a subjective residuum outside the scope of scientific inquiry. The present paper suggests that the phenomenological approach presents significant advantages over the latter, inasmuch as it makes intentionality less problematic or puzzling.

In a nutshell, my argument is as follows: (1) the notion of intentionality as it is commonly used is highly problematic, giving rise to the so-called “problem of intentionality” and related issues (violation of the excluded middle and substitutivity of identicals principles); (2) the problem of intentionality is a linguistic artifact rather than a substantive problem; (3) the phenomenological approach to intentionality first defended by Brentano is to construe intentionality in purely phenomenological terms, that is, to substitute appearance words for intentional verbs; (4) this substitution has the effect of dissolving the problem of intentionality; (5) the phenomenological approach to intentionality is therefore less problematic, and hence better in this respect.

1. *The Problem of Intentionality*

“Intentionality” is a technical term that is used within a community of experts—mostly scholars in philosophy—and has no use outside of this community. Obviously, its use within the philosophical community must fulfill certain conditions that make it intelligible and legitimate. If these conditions are not met, then the word is used in a different sense and denotes something different, with the result that communication and mutual understanding are no longer possible. There can be disagreement on the nature of intentionality, but philosophers must at least agree on a small number of rules or conditions under which the word “intentionality” can be intelligibly used. In my view, these minimal conditions are captured by the following (nominal) definition:

Intentionality is a property by virtue of which something is about something else that may as well not exist (in the ordinary sense of the word “exist”).

This definition states two minimal conditions for using the word “intentionality” within the philosophical community—two conditions shared by virtually all theories of intentionality since Brentano (an exception will be discussed a bit further on):

- (A) There must exist a relation of “aboutness” or “directedness” between the representing and the represented.
- (B) What the representation is about, or is directed toward, may or may not exist (in the ordinary sense of the word).

Since these two conditions govern the use of the word “intentionality,” they must be a priori self-evident or intuitive. If you understand what the word “intentionality” means within the philosophical community, then you must know a priori that “intentionality” is used to denote something that satisfies both requirements (A) and (B). Suppose, for example, that a friend of yours tells you this: “Yesterday I bought two shirts, one of which is gray while the other is black. But there is something very strange about them. Quite unexpectedly, the black color of my black shirt looks much lighter in daylight than the gray color of my gray shirt.” You will reply that this is impossible or absurd. But your friend insists: “If you don’t believe me,” he says, “check out this picture I took of my two shirts!” You may respond by saying something like this: “True, one of the two shirts is lighter than the other. But actually I am not denying that one of the shirts is a lighter color. I just meant that the

lighter one cannot be black.” Of course, the impossibility for black to be lighter than gray is not the sort of a posteriori truth that can be discovered by looking at photos. It is a priori self-evident in this sense: we know that in our linguistic community, we usually call “black” a color that is darker than the color we usually call “gray.” We intuitively know it because we have learned it from our parents, not by observing shirts. If someone tells you she has seen a black shirt that looks lighter in daylight than a gray shirt, you will likely reply not that this is false and that your interlocutor should take a closer look at the shirts, but that this is absurd and that she should consult a dictionary.

The two requirements above already imply a certain paradox that is constitutive of intentionality. (I call it “constitutive” in the sense that it already appears in the rules governing the use of the word “intentionality.” If all round squares are called “ABCD,” then it should not be surprising that constitutively all ABCDs are both round and square at the same time and that this poses a problem.) The issue at stake is that according to the definition above, a representation is both necessarily about something (A) and possibly about nothing (B)—which clearly involves a contradiction. Intentionality is not merely a relation between subject and object, or between mind and world, but a subject-object relation such that it is possible that the object is missing.

This issue is often called the “problem of intentionality.” Briefly, it arises as follows. Every representation is necessarily about something. For example, beliefs are intentional insofar as the sentence “I believe, but I believe nothing” simply makes no sense. We know a priori that it is impossible for a belief to be about nothing: someone who believes nothing does not believe at all. In another respect, however, it happens very often that the object the representation is about does not exist. There is nothing in the world that is an object of a hallucination. Hallucinations as well as fictions, dreams, false beliefs, and memories are about nothing. Therefore it happens very often that a representation is both about something and about nothing. For example, your fictional representation of Pinocchio is about something, namely, Pinocchio. However, since Pinocchio does not exist, your fictional representation of Pinocchio is about nothing.

The most commonly used formulation of the so-called problem of intentionality puts the accent on the relational nature of intentionality. It can be

obtained by combining the two requirements above with a third rule concerning the use of the word “relation.” We face, then, the following trilemma:¹

- (A) Necessarily, for all x , if x represents α , then x stands in a relation to α .
- (Rel) Necessarily, for all x , if x stands in a relation to α , then there exist a y and a z such that x is identical with y and α is identical with z .
- (B) There exists an x such that x represents α and there exists no y such that α is identical with y .

To put it otherwise: intentionality is, by definition, a relation; the existence of a relation necessarily entails that of all its relata; in many cases, one of the relata—namely, the intentional object α —does not exist. Proposition (Rel) is a rule for the use of the word “relation.” To someone who tells you that she lives in the Land of Toys depicted in Carlo Collodi’s *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, you will reply that this is nonsense and that she *must* live elsewhere, since it is impossible to stand in a relation of inhabiting to a place that does not exist.

The problem resides in the fact that each of the three propositions appears to be true separately, but that their conjunction is inconsistent. Indeed, the conjunction of (A) and (Rel) entails, by transitivity of implication, that

- (C) Necessarily, for all x , if x represents α , then there exists a z such that α is identical with z ,

which contradicts proposition (B).

As I said at the outset, my suggestion is that the problem of intentionality thus conceived is not a substantive, but merely a verbal problem arising from the grammatical rules that govern the use of certain words, especially intentional verbs, within a given community of experts.² The actual issue is that the conditions for the use of intentional verbs and related words are mutually inconsistent under the presupposition (Rel).

If it is correct that the so-called problem of intentionality is basically a grammatical problem, then overcoming it requires changing the way we talk about intentional facts. In short, what is needed are changes at the conceptual or linguistic level. Broadly speaking, at least two distinct strategies are

¹ Caston 1998, 253; Crane 2001, 23; Kriegel 2007, 307–308; Blumson 2009.

² This sort of view has been defended, for example, by Searle (1983) and by the late Brentano.

available. First, we can change the usage rules, namely, the meaning of words used in propositions (A), (Rel), and (B). Second, we can change the words themselves. In what follows I will discuss these two strategies and point out a significant advantage of the second one. This will finally allow me to provide some reasons for favoring a certain version of it—namely, what I take to be the phenomenological approach to intentionality.

2. *The Jargonizing Strategy*

Let us begin with the first strategy, which I term the “jargonizing” strategy. This strategy is to leave the wording unchanged and to change the rules of usage, that is, to stipulate new rules prescribing a different, technical use of the same words.

As I said, it is obviously impossible to change the rules for the use of the word “intentionality” itself.³ For example, you can call “intentional state” or “representation” a certain variety of pancake so as to make the problem of intentionality disappear. No doubt it will disappear, since pancakes are not the kind of thing that stands in a relation to something that does not exist. However, very few philosophers will be willing to say that you have thereby solved the problem of intentionality.

The rules that govern the use of “intentionality” and related words cannot be changed. But it remains possible to remove the contradiction by changing the rules associated with other words being used in the three propositions above.

First, we can change the meaning of the verb “exist” in condition (B), thus agreeing with (A) and (Rel), but not with (B). This amounts to saying something like the following: we, as experts in the field, do not use the word “exist” in the usual sense, but in a technical or exotic sense that deviates from how it is ordinarily used; in the sense in which we use the term, fictional and

³ The only attempt I am aware of in the literature to challenge both (A) and (B) is Smith and Mulligan 1986. These authors claim not merely that the intentional reference to an inexistent object is a relation that is not a real relation, but that it is not really a relation at all. The relational view of it is an illusion caused by the syntactic structure of intentional sentences. Chisholm (1967) similarly suggests that Brentano’s late characterization of intentionality as a “quasi-relation” amounts to an adverbial account of intentionality. See also Moran 1996; Kriegel 2016. According to Bell 1990, such an adverbial account is an innovation of Husserl’s own.

hallucinated objects can legitimately be said to “exist.” According to some commentators,⁴ this view is the one originally defended by Brentano. The idea is that fictional and hallucinated objects exist in a “mode of being” different from actual existence: “The object of the thought about a unicorn is a unicorn, but a unicorn with a mode of being (intentional inexistence, immanent objectivity, or existence in the understanding) that is short of actuality” (Chisholm 2006, 705). On the basis of this, we will say that the contradiction under consideration is only apparent, since “exist” means something different in (B) and (C). Hence the problem of intentionality is overcome.

Another way of resolving the contradiction is to change the meaning of the word “relation” in proposition (Rel). This means accepting (A) and (B) while rejecting (Rel): it is not true that no relation can obtain unless all its relata exist. Besides so-called “real relations” whose existence really entails that of all their relata, there are some very special relations that can exist in the absence of one or more of their relata. Or we can also accept the rule (Rel) in restricting its scope to real relations, the idea being that intentionality, although a relation, is not a relation of the same kind as that involved in (Rel).⁵ In both cases, the contradiction between (B) and (C) goes away.

The main concern with the jargonizing strategy is that it is ad hoc and counterintuitive. It must be ad hoc and counterintuitive, since it changes usage rules that are intuitively self-evident within a given linguistic community. This is not a sufficient reason for excluding the jargonizing option from consideration. However, it is my view that we should first try to frame and solve the issues at stake in a way that is more in accordance with our intuitions. If we fail to find any such solution, then the jargonizing strategy will emerge as a plausible candidate for a solution to the problem of intentionality.

⁴ Kraus 1924; Chisholm 2006; McAlister 1970.

⁵ Similarly, Peter Geach describes the knowing-that relation as a “Cambridge change,” that is, as a relation that is not a “binary relation of two individuals” and that Aquinas, like Aristotle, wrongly viewed as a two-term relation because “his logical apparatus was inadequate and his language misleading” (Geach 1972, 323–324). See also this famous remark by Searle: “Notice that Intentionality cannot be an ordinary relation like sitting on top of something or hitting it with one’s fist because for a large number of Intentional states I can be in the Intentional state without the object or state of affairs that the Intentional state is ‘directed at’ even existing” (Searle 1983, 4). This approach may look close to Brentano’s late characterization of intentionality as a “quasi-relation.” But as I will suggest further on, this parallel is misleading.

3. *The Translating Strategy*

I now move on to the second strategy, which I will call the “translating strategy.” The rough idea is that we don’t use the right words and that the words themselves should be changed. The problem of intentionality comes from the fact that the intuitions associated with the words being used in our initial definition of intentionality are mutually inconsistent. In consequence, we have to reformulate (A) and (B) using new words that do not generate the same inconsistencies. This is very different from changing the usage rules. Instead of using the same words to denote different facts, we should now use different words to denote the same facts.

An example of the translating strategy is the functionalist approach that still dominates much of contemporary debate on intentionality. Defining intentionality by analogy with computer programs or biological functions basically boils down to abandoning the relational understanding of intentionality and to creating instead a new definition that intuitively allows that the represented object may not exist. As it is commonly used, the word “function” by definition denotes something that can succeed or fail. The digestive function of the stomach does not cease to exist when the stomach ceases to perform it. This is not paradoxical at all, but consistent with how we normally use the word.

Likewise, if intentionality is defined as a function rather than a relation, then there is nothing paradoxical in the fact that a representation is directed toward an inexistent object. A mental state can represent an object even though this object does not exist. Thus the so-called problem of intentionality ceases to be a problem at all.

The phenomenological approach to intentionality promoted by Brentano and his followers can be seen as deploying a similar strategy. It is to eliminate the intentional idiom and replace it with a purely phenomenological idiom.⁶ Since intentional verbs like “represent,” “remember,” “believe,” etc., are deceiving, they should be replaced by equivalent phrasings with appearance words. Appearance words are, for example, “seem,” “appear,” “similar,” “resemble.” To do this, we need a real definition of intentionality—a definition that clarifies what intentionality is all about. Brentano undoubtedly proposed such a definition. On my interpretation, this definition could be expressed as follows:

⁶ For more detail on this, see Seron 2017a; 2017b.

(INT) Necessarily, for all x : x represents α if, and only if, x appears and α appears in x and x exists and α does not exist,

where x denotes a present mental act or state, α its intentional object, and “represents” the relation of intentional directedness in any of its modes—for example, remembering, imagining, believing.⁷ The right-hand side of the biconditional lays down necessary, sufficient, and essential conditions for intentionality. The left-hand side serves as a (misleading) abbreviation for the right-hand side. In other words: each sentence of the form “... represents...” can and should be replaced by an equivalent sentence of the form given by the right-hand side of the definition (the intentional mode can be expressed by adverbs such as “memorially,” “imaginatively,” “doxically,” etc.).

It is important to note here that the clause “ α does not exist” makes it impossible to quantify over α . Put otherwise: here we have to use an individual constant that somehow infringes the rule of existential generalization. As is well known, the failure of existential generalization has long been recognized as a constitutive peculiarity of intentional sentences.⁸ It is obviously a consequence of the problem of intentionality itself as stated above.

What does (INT) really tell us? In Brentano’s terminology, “to appear” is synonymous with “to be presented” (*vorgestellt werden*).⁹ If the object appears or is presented as something that really exists in the present, then it is said to be “perceived” (*wahrgenommen*). With this terminology in hand, we can explain definition (INT) by saying: a representation of an object means

⁷ See Brentano 1924, 124–125 / 1995, 88 (α appears in x); *ibid.* 14/10, 129/92 (x exists); *ibid.* 14–15/10–11, 124–125/89; 128–129/92; 132/93–94 (α does not exist). One might be tempted to add a further clause to the effect that x must be numerically distinct from α —but actually this clause is already contained in the clause “ x exists and α does not exist,” which yields a contradiction if $x = \alpha$. Importantly, Brentano’s definition imposes a stronger condition than (B), namely, that necessarily α does not exist. This is a notable difference from accounts of intentionality in terms of representational opacity.

⁸ Chisholm 1957; Searle 1983.

⁹ “As we use the verb ‘to present’ (*Vorstellen*), ‘to be presented’ means the same as ‘to appear’” (Brentano 1924, 114/1995, 81); “We speak of a presentation (*Vorstellen*) whenever something appears to us” (Brentano 1925, 34 / 198); “Whenever something appears, i. e., is given in consciousness, we speak of a presentation (*Vorstellen*)” (Brentano 1956, 32). In this sense the verb “present” is a synonym for phenomenal consciousness. Crane (2017, 45) takes it to indicate “the fundamental way of being conscious of an object.”

inwardly perceiving (or being phenomenally conscious of) *a mental event in which this object appears (or presents itself) without existing.*

This is the substance of Brentano's so-called "theory of secondary objects." In a nutshell, this theory states that every representation must have two distinct objects (x and α in our formula). Representing something involves having a presentation of both the presently experienced mental phenomenon and its intentional object. The former—the "secondary object" of the representation—is presented as really existing in the present, that is, perceived. The latter—the "primary object"—is not presented as really existing and hence appears in another mode than perception (for example, in imagination or belief).

4. *Overcoming the Problem of Intentionality*

The definition given in the previous section is phenomenological in the sense that it allows us to eliminate intentional verbs by replacing them with appearance words, that is, to describe intentional facts in purely phenomenological terms. In other words, the phrase " x appears and α appears in x and x exists and α does not exist" can and should be substituted for every occurrence of " x represents α ." Given this, we can test whether or not the problem of intentionality still holds after performing such a substitution in its formulation above. If the problem disappears, then this will likely mean that the problem of intentionality is not a real problem, but an artifact due to the misleading grammar of intentional verbs. Put more simply: changing the words is enough to dissolve it.

Performing the substitution yields the following propositions (for the sake of clarity I don't use quantificational paraphrases of "exist" here):

(A') Necessarily, for all x , if x appears and α appears in x and x exists and α does not exist, then x stands in a relation to α .

(Rel) Necessarily, for all x , if x stands in a relation to α , then x exists and α exists.

(B') There exists an x such that x appears and α appears in x and α does not exist.

Two things may be noted at this stage. First, (A') is a tautology, since "... appears in..." denotes a relation. Second, the conjunction of (A') and (Rel) entails a contradiction, namely:

(D) Necessarily, for all x , if x appears and α appears in x and x exists and α does not exist, then α exists.

Thus our phenomenological rephrasing seems to bring us straight back to the same problem as before. We have got rid of the relation "... represents...", but intentionality is now interpreted as involving another kind of relation, namely "... appears in..." Since according to (Rel), the holding of a relation necessarily requires the existence of all its relata, α must exist if its representation exists. However, (B') asserts that the represented object α does not exist.

As formulated above, the problem of intentionality comes from the relational construal of intentional facts. So we have proposed eliminating intentional verbs, which are grammatically relational. However, it seems that the proposed account does not solve the problem, since we are now faced with another relation, namely "... appears in..." But is this really so? I think not. My view is that the phenomenological approach is better because it allows to overcome the problem of intentionality.

The most important element for our purposes is that "... appears in..." is obviously not a relation of such a kind that if it obtains, then all its relata must exist. Suppose you look in the closet and hallucinate the Blue Fairy surrounded by a sparkling cloud of diamond-like particles. Several relations of the type "... appears in..." are thereby experienced: the Blue Fairy appears in a sparkling cloud, in the closet, in a long sky-blue dress, etc. Yet all these relations involve one or more inexistent objects. It is really true that the Blue Fairy appears to you in a sparkling cloud, even though fairies and sparkling clouds actually do not exist. Accordingly, "... appears in..." is not a relation whose existence implies that of its relata. Instead, it is a relation such that its *appearing* requires the *appearing* of all its relata—an apparent or phenomenal relation. Supposing the rule (Rel) is correct, it does not apply to phenomenal relations. The reason for this is not that phenomenal relations are very special relations that intrinsically differ from real relations, but more simply that they are not required to obtain.

Yet you may object that we could also characterize the relation "... represents..." as a relation such that one or more of its relata may not exist. What is the difference? In my estimation, the difference is that this would be a purely ad hoc stipulation. Moreover, such a stipulation cannot contribute to solving the problem of intentionality. How it can be that intentionality violates (Rel) is a question that can obviously not be answered by simply stipulating that there is some technical sense of "relation" in which a relation may violate (Rel). Changing the way we intuitively understand the word "relation"

is just as paradoxical as the problem of intentionality itself. Since what we call the “problem of intentionality” is precisely a paradox, such a change cannot help to resolve it. In contrast, our phenomenological rephrasing is not paradoxical. It is not paradoxical to say: “The Blue Fairy does not exist, and she presently appears to me in the closet.” This is completely allowed by the grammar of appearance words, and this is just how we use them in everyday speaking. In the usual sense of the word, appearing does not entail existing.

5. Conclusion

An assumption underlying this paper is that the problem of intentionality is a linguistic artifact due to the grammar of intentional verbs. For this reason, it is not strictly correct to speak, as I did, of a Brentanian solution to the problem of intentionality. It would be more accurate to say that this problem simply does not exist in Brentano’s phenomenological account, since the words that Brentano employs when speaking of intentionality at the most basic level are not intentional verbs, but appearance words. In my view, a reason why the notion of intentionality seems so problematic is that it is detached from its original context, namely, Brentano’s phenomenalism.¹⁰

Brentano defended a variety of phenomenalism, claiming that all objects of experience, thought, and knowledge are phenomena or appearances. This led him to conceive the intentional relation as a purely phenomenal relation—namely, a relation between a mental phenomenon and another phenomenon that is contained in it and functions as its intentional object. Thus understood as a relation to an appearance, intentional directedness involves no paradox or contradiction. There is not the slightest paradox in saying that an appearance does not exist. It is a priori self-evident, in virtue of the grammar of appearance words, that something can appear without existing.

¹⁰ Tim Crane makes exactly the same point when he argues that the problem of intentionality “is pretty much invisible as long as we stay within the framework of methodological phenomenalism. If one is a methodological phenomenalist, one construes intentional relations as relations to phenomena, which are mental or mind-dependent. Since every intentional mental act is a relation to some phenomenon or other, then there simply is no issue about the non-existence, or the possible non-existence of objects of thought. So, in that sense, there is no problem of intentionality.” (Crane 2014, 38)

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