

## HOW NOT TO TALK ABOUT WHAT DOES NOT EXIST

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Why do people want to say that they can think about, refer to, have beliefs concerning so-called fictional entities? One reason is this. Consider the case, where a woman is standing in the corner of a room. John sees the most beautiful woman he has ever seen, Peter sees his wife: same referent, different senses. Exactly the same phenomenon seems to manifest itself in our reading of fiction. What follows is an attempt to sketch a theory which might do justice to the intuitions that have led people to assimilate the fiction case to the perceptual case, yet which does not suppose that there are fictional referents. The central place of mental acts and states in the theory will reveal its genesis in the thought of Brentano, Meinong and Husserl. But the general approach is nevertheless antithetical to their work, in that it rests on a denial of the thesis of intentionality. Certain acts, and in particular many acts of imagination, including some of those involved in reading fiction, are, it will be claimed, *not intentional*: there are no objects (existing or non-existing) towards which they are directed. It would take too long here to present in full the arguments for this thesis. I can point out only that its most important failing lies in its inability to do justice to cases like the following. Suppose I wish to annoy John. I invent a proper name at random and say to him: "There is a beautiful girl called 'Susan Simpkins' waiting for you in your bedroom." John has one or more mental acts whose object is, as he thinks, Susan Simpkins. But there is no such thing as Susan Simpkins, existent or non-existent. John is simply and (for his part) innocently making a mistake. And just as soon as he has examined his bedroom he will readily admit that he has been making a mistake. He will admit that *there is no object* which is such that his previous lascivious thoughts were about *it*. But this means that these lascivious thoughts were not in fact intentional, not directed to any object, even though John, at the time, thought that they were.

Yet it does seem to be the case that—barring special cases like episodic moods—every mental act is such that, as it takes place, it is associated with a *belief* to the effect that it is intentional, that it is directed towards some object or other. The claim that there are, associated with our acts, beliefs of the given sort, is a very trivial one: it is akin to the claim that, e.g., when I see a glass, I believe myself to see a glass. Formulating our conceptions in terms of such beliefs does nevertheless allow us to construct a doctrine of intentionality with certain advantages over the more familiar doctrine, somewhat as follows:

[IS] Every mental act *a* is mutually dependent upon an underlying state of conviction or belief *b*, whose content, when articulated, has the form: *a* has-an-object-of-such-and-such-a-type.

By '*a* is mutually dependent upon *b*' here I mean simply: *a* is, as a matter of necessity, such that it cannot exist unless *b* exists and *vice versa* (cf. Husserl's 3rd Logical Investigation).

The thesis [IS] bears some similarity to Brentano's doctrine of inner perception. This asserts that all acts are such as to involve a moment of self-consciousness or, more precisely, that every mental act *a* involves as one of its component parts (moments) a presentation *p*, having *a* itself as object. One possible kernel of truth in this doctrine might be expressed here by means of a thesis of the form:

[IC] Every mental act *a* of a subject *S* is mutually dependent upon an underlying state of conviction or belief *b* whose content, when articulated, has the form: *a* is dependent on *S*.

[IS] will recall also certain aspects of the so-called adverbial theory of intentionality. The latter conceived what would normally be regarded as an assertion about John's mental act as an assertion about John himself: that he is 'minded in a certain way' (e.g. as a perceiver-of-rodents, or as an imaginer-of-unicorns). The adverbial theory in effect denies that *any* act is related to an object—there are just subjects, modified in certain ways. The thesis here defended, on the other hand, can allow that some acts are related to objects in a quite straightforward way, since it exploits the existential-quantification-blocking machinery of hyphenisation not in order to translate away our talk about *acts*, but rather as a means of articulating the contents of certain associated *beliefs*.

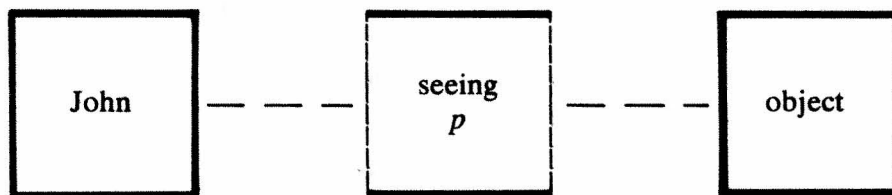
Return, now, to the thesis [IS]. How are *a* and *b* related? Inspection reveals that it is as if the act *a* brings the associated belief *b* into existence; it *instigates* the belief, and in such a way that the act itself cannot exist unless such a belief is instigated by it. This implies a distinction between instigated and non-instigated beliefs. The former we acquire, spontaneously, with specific acts. The latter are slow-maturing; they are not tied to specific acts or groups of acts in any immediate way. The *object* of an instigated belief *b* is always a real, existent entity; it is just the associated occurrent or episodic mental act *a* itself; and the belief predicates *of* this object a certain property, namely the property of having-an-object-of-such-and-such-a-kind.

Note that the belief *b* as articulated in [IS] is *not* a belief to the effect that there is a *relation* between *a* and some given object. For whilst some acts may be associated with underlying beliefs of the latter kind, to read this structure into the underlying beliefs instigated by all acts would be to fall back to the Meinongian strategy for dealing with the phenomena of fiction, imagination and mistake, and the thesis here defended is that, by paying sufficient attention to the structures of our *acts*, we can carve out an alternative and at least in some respects more adequate strategy.

The thesis [IS] allows us to embrace a more realistic understanding of intentionality, to insist that an act is intentional only if it *has* a real object, only if there is some real (i.e. spatio-temporal) entity or entities towards which it is directed. And because acts themselves are real—they are special kinds of events or processes—we would seem to have here a means of doing justice to at least certain hitherto problematic phenomena associated with intentionality, in a way which does not involve any commitment to the “non-existent”.

Our cognitive contact with the world is established first and foremost by acts which manifest what might be called *relational* intentionality, i.e. by acts which are themselves real material relations in the sense that they are dependent for their existence upon at least two objects—a subject and a target—other than themselves (cf. my “Acta cum fundamentis in re”, forthcoming in *Dialectica*). We might draw a parallel between these acts and the presentations which give rise to what Russell called *knowledge by acquaintance*, noting thereby that the range of objects of relational acts as here conceived is much wider than the range of Russellian “immediate objects of acquaintance”. It comprehends *all* real entities: substances, events, processes, states, acts, actions, etc., and parts and aggregates of all of these.

A relational act might be pictured as follows:



—where the dotted lines connecting broken to solid walls denote relations of one-sided dependence. The clearest examples of such relational acts are provided by acts of perception. But we shall see that, because of the central place of perception in the organisation of our ex-

rience, there is a sense in which *all* mental acts—with the exception, precisely, of cases like imagination—share something of the status of relationality. Consider, again, John's act *p* of visual perception. This act has in fact two underlying instigated belief-moments. It instigates not only the intentionality-belief captured in *[IS]*, but also a belief to the effect that the act itself is really involved with some segment of the world external to the subject—not merely in the sense of causal involvement, but in the strong sense that there is a direct relation of one-sided dependence of the act upon some relevant segment of the world. Perception counts as perception for a subject only if he believes that his act depends for its existence upon something independent of himself. Note that this is, again, a belief *about* the act: it predicates of the act a certain property. This double-barrelled belief-moment might be formulated—again provisionally—as follows:

*[IP]* An act of perception *p* of a subject *S* is mutually dependent upon (i) an instigated belief on the part of *S* that *p* has-an-object-of-such-and-such-a-kind, and (ii) an instigated belief on the part of *S* that *p* is dependent-for-its-existence-upon-some-part-of-the-world-independent-of-*S*-himself.

Now many other kinds of acts, too, other than acts of perception involve, tacit though not always justified claims to relationality. For even in cases where we are e.g. thinking about objects with which we have no relational content, or are not directly conscious of having had such contact, a belief-moment of type (ii) will normally be associated with our acts. In the case of pure acts of imagination, however, i.e. acts of imagination involving no external material props, the belief-moment of type (ii) is quite deliberately *cancelled*. If I imagine a unicorn perched on the table in the corner, then my imagining is certainly associated with a type-(i) instigated belief-moment to the effect that it has-an-object-of-such-and-such-a-kind. But it is equally certainly associated with a belief whose content amounts to a *denial* of the content of the type (ii) instigated belief-moment to the effect that it is dependent-for-its-existence-upon-some-external-segment-of-reality:

*[II]* An act of pure imagination *i* of a subject *S* is mutually dependent upon (i) an instigated belief on the part of *S* that *i* has-an-object-of-such-and-such-a-kind and (ii) an instigated belief on the part of *S* that *i* is dependent for its existence *exclusively* on *S* himself (and upon certain moments of *S*, including, e.g., relevant acquired knowledge-states).

This account might be tentatively extended to the case of, say, the acts of imagination involved in reading works of fiction, by means of a thesis somewhat as follows:

*[IF]* An act of imagination *f* of a subject *S*, associated with the reading of fiction, is mutually dependent upon (i) an instigated belief on the part of *S* that *f* has-an-object-of-such-and-such-a-kind and (ii) an instigated belief on the part of *S* that *f* is dependent for its existent exclusively upon *S* himself and e.g. upon some relevant textual artefact.

Of course *[II]* and *[IF]* do not as yet amount to a theory of imagination. They capture in a loose way only two particularly simple cases from a huge and diverse family. It is hoped that they do, nevertheless, present at least some of the ingredients for an adequate theory of phenomena of the given kind.

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