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INTENTIONALITY, SENSE AND THE MIND

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This thesis is all my own original work

M J Harney

*Fain would I haue a pretie thing,
to giue vnto my Ladie:
I name no thing, nor I meane no thing,
But as pretie a thing as may bee.*

("The Lamentation of a Woman Being Wrongfully Defamed. To the tune of Damon & Pithias." A Handefull of Pleasant Delites by Clement Robinson and diuers others. London, 1584)

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Abstract

To say that thought is intentional is to say that thought is directed to some object. Objects to which thought is directed are problematic: unlike the objects of physical acts - like hitting - they need not exist in reality: I may think of a unicorn, or imagine a centaur, even though such objects do not exist. However, in most cases my thoughts are directed to existing objects: I may think of President Carter or I may envy Mrs Thatcher. In such cases the object of my thought is none other than the existing individual that might also be the object of a physical act such as hitting or kicking.

A theory of intentionality must allow us to say both that thought can succeed in achieving objective reference and that the objects of thought need not exist in reality. Brentano's essential insight was to show that the latter - the possible non-existence of the object - is the distinctive feature of the mental. However, he saw this as a problem concerning the ontological status of objects of thought, which he attempted to resolve by ascribing to such objects a mode of "existence-in-the-mind", thereby denying that mental acts can succeed in achieving objective reference. This problem can be avoided however if intentionality is seen as a feature of language rather than of phenomena. On the linguistic version of the intentionality thesis, the criteria for intentionality are stated as logical features of the sentences we use to talk about the psychological.

We can assert both that thought can succeed in achieving objective reference and that the objects of thought need not exist in reality, by appealing to Frege's notion of sense. This means that the semantical framework for our theory of intentionality must be the Fregean three-levelled framework consisting of sign, sense and referent. In terms of this framework, "objective reference", which is a possibility in the case of the mental, must be understood in terms of Frege's notion of reference as that which is mediated by sense; the distinctive feature of the psychological - viz., possible non-existence of the object - must be understood by appeal to the Fregean semantic model of signs which have a sense but which do not refer to anything.

Serious problems arise for a theory of intentionality when the notion of "objective reference" is explicated without appeal to Frege's notion of sense. For example, if "objective reference" is characterised in terms of the Russellian two-levelled semantical framework which admits only sign and referent, then we are forced to deny the intentionality of some or, perhaps, all psychological acts. Alternatively, if we attempt to maintain the irreducibility of the intentional, then there are seemingly intractable problems in providing a coherent account of the intentionality of acts which do succeed in achieving objective reference, when "objective reference" is characterised in the absence of the notion of sense.

It has been argued by some philosophers including Quine and Putnam, that sense is itself a "mentalistic" notion; a notion tied to a mentalistic theory of meaning. If this objection can be sustained, then a theory of the intentionality of the mental which appeals to the notion of sense, will be circular. This kind of objection exposes a serious shortcoming in Frege's own theory of sense. Frege provides us with no theory of how it is that sense, which is a means to reference, relates to the mind. To meet the charge of "mentalism" which is levelled against Frege's theory of sense, we must supplement his account with a theory of how sense (or meaning) can be both "mind-related" and the means to objective reference. This supplementation can be provided by Husserl's theory of intentionality. Husserl's account of the intentionality of consciousness, and the theory of linguistic meaning and reference which is a consequence of this account, allows us to treat Fregean sense as an intentional notion; one that is thereby both mind-related and the means to objective reference.

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INTRODUCTION

The intentionality of the mental means the object-directedness of thought. Brentano, the acknowledged source of recent approaches to intentionality, explains this by saying

In presentation something is presented, in judgement something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired, and so on.¹

Reflection upon the history of the concept of intentionality since Brentano reveals a paradox: For certain post-Wittgensteinian philosophers of the British analytical tradition,² the thesis that thought is intentional is seized upon as a way of defeating the mentalistic consequences of Cartesian dualism, viz., that thought and its objects are private, introspectible events and items which exist in the mind. To assert that thought is intentional is to claim that mental phenomena can succeed in achieving objective reference. This is attested to by the fact that the language we use to describe the object of thought in, for example, A's thinking of President Carter, succeeds in referring to some existing individual and not to some private object which exists in the mind.

On the other hand, what is distinctive about the objects to which mental phenomena are directed is that they need not exist in reality. I may imagine a unicorn or think of Pegasus, even though such objects do not exist. Brentano himself was concerned with the kind of existence that might be ascribed to thought-of unicorns, imagined-centaurs, and other non-existent objects of thought. This concern led him to the mentalistic conclusion that the objects to which mental phenomena are directed are "intentionally in-existent" objects - objects which are immanent to the mental act and which, therefore, exist in the mind.

The paradox then, is that, from the intentionality of the mental, some philosophers (including Brentano) have drawn mentalistic consequences, whereas other philosophers (the post-Wittgensteinians) have drawn the opposite conclusion.

1. Brentano (1874), p. 88.

2. The protagonists of the "analytic" or "linguistic" versions of intentionality referred to here include Kenny, Anscombe, Geach.

Although these conclusions are incompatible, the premisses from which each is derived are not inherently inconsistent with one another.

(i) The linguistic philosophers give primacy to the following:

Mental phenomena can succeed in achieving objective reference

(Thesis I);

(ii) Brentano gives prominence to the following:

Mental phenomena are distinguished by the fact that their objects need not exist (Thesis II).

A satisfactory theory of intentionality must incorporate both of these theses. That is to say, our account of "objective reference" in Thesis I must still be consistent with Thesis II, so that we can preserve what is distinctive about the mental; our account of "possible non-existence" in Thesis II must still be consistent with Thesis I, so that we can avoid a mentalistic theory of objects of thought.

The central claim of this thesis is that it is only by appeal to Frege's notion of sense that a satisfactory theory of intentionality can be constructed. Chapter I provides the background to this claim by showing, first, why it is that Brentano's own theory of intentionality leads inescapably to a mentalistic theory of objects of thought, and, second, how this unwelcome consequence can be avoided if intentionality is understood as a feature of language rather than as a feature of phenomena. Chisholm's re-formulation of Brentano's intentionality thesis in terms of logical features of the sentences we use to talk about the psychological allows us to construe the question of objective reference (in Thesis I) as a question about linguistic reference rather than, as for Brentano, an ontological question about "modes of being". At the same time, the linguistic re-formulation of Brentano's thesis introduces new considerations and criteria concerning the language we use to talk about the psychological. These are the Fregean-derived criteria for the intensionality of language which, for Frege, are to be understood by appeal to his notion of sense.

In Chapter II we see explicitly what is involved in an appeal to Frege's notion of sense. Such an appeal commits us to accepting a three-levelled semantical framework consisting of sign, sense and referent. In terms of this framework, reference is always mediated by sense. Furthermore, it is a framework which commits us to admitting signs (i.e., names) which have a sense but which do not refer to

anything. The Fregean semantical framework is contrasted with Russell's two-levelled semantical framework consisting only of sign (i.e., name) and referent. In terms of the Russellian framework reference is unmediated by sense; names necessarily refer to some existing thing. (There can be no signs i.e., names, which lack a reference). If we invoke the Fregean three-levelled semantical framework to explicate intentionality, then "objective reference" in Thesis I is to be understood as that which is mediated by sense; because, within the Fregean framework we can admit signs which have a sense but which do not refer to anything, we can also allow for "possible non-existence of objects of thought" in Thesis II. Frege provides us with the appropriate semantical framework for saying both that mental phenomena can succeed in achieving objective reference (Thesis I) and that they may fail to do so (Thesis II). But, in both cases, it is the notion of sense which is crucial.

Problems arise for a theory of intentionality if we accept the Russellian two-levelled framework in place of the Fregean one in explicating objective reference in Thesis I. These problems are discussed in Chapter III in connection with the relational theory of thoughts about existing objects. This theory derives from Russell's theory of names. The logical consequence of this approach to objective reference in Thesis I is the reduction of the mental to the physical and, ultimately, the repudiation of the intentional altogether.

Problems of a different kind arise for the "irreducibility theorists" when Fregean sense is (either explicitly or implicitly) ignored. These theorists endorse Chisholm's claim (derived from Brentano) that intentionality is irreducible - sentences about the mental cannot be translated into sentences about the physical. The problems for the irreducibility theorist arise from the attempt to say both that intentionality is distinctive of all and only mental phenomena and that the object of a mental act can be "objective" in precisely the same way that the object of a physical act is "objective". The difficulties for the irreducibility theorist are exemplified in Anscombe's attempts to provide an account of the intentionality of perception. These are discussed in Chapter IV. This discussion serves to make explicit some of the presuppositions involved in Anscombe's setting up of the problems of intentionality. Unlike the

relational theorists, there is nothing which is explicitly anti-Fregean in Anscombe's account. But neither can we say that there is anything specifically Fregean about the framework within which Anscombe approaches the problem of intentionality. In a later discussion - Chapter VI - it emerges that Anscombe's framework is fundamentally incompatible with a Fregean semantical framework which admits the notion of sense.

The characterisation of "objective reference" in Thesis I in terms of a two-levelled semantical framework (whether this be an explicit acceptance of a Russellian theory of reference, or an implicit neglect of Frege's notion of sense) is one successful way of avoiding a mentalistic theory of objects of thought. But this success is at the expense of either (a) relinquishing the intentionality of those acts, or (b) creating intractable problems for an attempt to state that acts which are intentional can succeed in achieving objective reference.

These problems are avoided if we appeal to Frege's notion of sense in affirming Theses I and II. To make this claim, however, we must be able to meet an objection raised by certain post-Fregean philosophers of language - viz., that the notion of sense is tied to a mentalistic theory of meaning. Quine, for example, argues that senses or intensions (i.e., meanings) are entities which exist in the mind. A more serious objection is raised by Putnam who argues that, because senses or intensions are "mind-related" (i.e., what is grasped in an act of understanding the meaning of a term), meaning qua sense has merely psychological status. If Putnam's argument is justified, then the Fregean thesis that reference is determined by sense must be seen as a "psychologistic" theory of the determination of reference: one which holds that reference is determined by "merely psychological" considerations. Our task in Chapter V will be to specify precisely what kind of "mentalistic" theory is ascribed to Frege by these critics. Here we will see that in order to meet the charge of mentalism we must, on Frege's behalf, be able to offer an account of how sense (i.e., meaning) relates to the mind without thereby introducing a psychologistic theory of meaning and reference.

Frege himself does not provide us with such a theory, although as a committed adversary of psychologism, he would certainly have resisted these criticisms. In order to counter the accusation of mentalism, therefore, it is necessary to supplement Frege's theory

of sense with a non-psychologistic theory of the way in which sense or meaning can be at once "mind-related" and a means to objective reference. In Chapter VI it will be argued that this supplementation is to be provided by Husserl's phenomenological account of linguistic meaning and reference which is based on his theory of the intentionality of acts of consciousness. Husserl's theory of linguistic meaning and reference is proposed as part of a deliberate attack on psychologistic theories of meaning. In Husserl's theory, a psychological approach to meaning is replaced by a phenomenological one. The semantical framework for his theory of meaning and reference is the Fregean three-levelled one, in which reference is mediated by meaning, and in which signs (names) which have a meaning but which do not refer to anything are admitted. For Husserl, however, the semantical framework of name, meaning, referent is one which results from his theory of the intentionality of acts of consciousness - a theory which tells us that, to every act, there corresponds a meaning-content through which some object is intended. In terms of this theory, the "mind-relatedness" of linguistic meaning or sense is to be explained by saying that the latter is an intentional notion - one tied to the intentionality of acts. At the same time, the meaning (or "noema") of an intentional act is the means by which we intend something objective. Husserl's theory of intentionality provides us with a non-psychologistic account of the way in which Fregean sense can be both mind-related and a "vehicle for objective reference".¹

1. Olafson (1975), p. 76: "Intentionality is ... the basic vehicle of objective reference generally and thus of our knowledge of the world which Husserl speaks of as a comprehensive intentional object."