What is Intentionality?

The minds capacity to represent gives rise to two major species of question:

- How do we reconcile mental representation with a naturalistic scientific project?
  - Naturalism: the view that there’s nothing beyond “the natural”…. (broadly taken to mean “the familiar stuff we’re all happy accepting into our ontology already”)

- What is the nature of mental representation? How does answering that question change our understanding of mental processes like inference etc.?

- Constant background buzz question: what is the relationship between mental representation and other forms of representation
  - How similar is it to linguistic representation?
  - Does it depend on linguistic representation or vice versa?
  - Are other forms of non-mental representation always parasitic on mental representation?

1. What is intentionality? First pass

- The “aboutness” or directedness of mental states. Sometimes captured by saying they take an object or have content.

E.g. “I believe it’s raining”, “I can smell the skullduggery from here”, “I hope we’ll build a fairer world soon”, “I can see you”. These all attribute mental states which are about something: the rain, the skullduggery, a fairer world…

N.b. needn’t be conscious or accessible.

2. Is intentionality the mark of the mental?

Franz Brentano (1838-1917) suggested that intentionality is the “the mark of the mental”, i.e. that all and only mental phenomena exhibit it.

“Every mental phenomenon is characterized by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object, and what we might call, though not wholly unambiguously, reference to a content, direction toward an object (which is not to be understood here as meaning a thing), or immanent objectivity. Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself, although they do not do so in the same way. In presentation, something is presented, in judgment something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired and so on.

This intentional inexistence is characteristic exclusively of mental phenomena. No physical phenomenon exhibits anything like it. We can, therefore, define mental phenomena by saying that they are those phenomena which contain an object intentionally within themselves.” (1874 88-89)

Brentano’s three theses here:

- It is constitutive of intentionality as exhibited by mental states that they are directed towards something
- It is characteristic of objects towards which the mind is directed that they display intentional inexistence.
- Intentionality is the mark of the mental: all and only mental states exhibit intentionality.

Two claims:

i. All mental states exhibit intentionality
   a. What about pains / pure sensations?
   b. Searle suggests as exceptions nervousness, elation, undirected anxiety…

ii. Only mental states exhibit intentionality
   a. What about books, or thermostats?
      i. That’s different: that’s derived intentionality. It’s derived from our original intentionality
   b. What about tree-rings? Or sedimentary rocks?
      i. That’s not real intentionality…(why not?)

3. What is the relationship between intentionality and intensionality?

IntenTionality has sometimes been thought to have a special relationship to a linguistic phenomenon, intenSionality...

Roderick Chisholm’s three (linguistic) criteria on intentionality:

i. No existential implication (a true sentence reports an intentional state if it contains a singular term that purports to refer to some object, and neither it nor its negation implies that the object in question does or does not exist.)

E.g. “Mommy kissed Santa Claus” implies the existence of mommy, and Santa Claus. “I believe in Santa Claus” does not imply that SC exists.

(But what about “I saw Mommy kissing Santa Claus”)

ii. No implication of truth of embedded clauses introduced by ‘that’.

E.g. If “It is true that Santa Claus always liked my brothers more than me” is true, then “Santa Claus always liked my brothers more than me” must be true. Not so with “I believe that Santa Claus always liked my brothers more than me.”

(But what about knowledge reports or other factive phenomena: “I know that my younger brothers resemble Santa Claus to a startling degree.”)

iii. No substitutivity of co-referring terms (a true sentence reports an intentional state if it contains a singular term whose replacement with another singular term that refers to the exact same thing can transform the truth value.)

E.g. Suppose “Santa Claus” and “Your Dad” refer to the same person. If “The dog bit Santa Claus” is true, then “The dog bit Your Dad” is true. But “I believe Santa Claus delivers gifts at Christmas” could be true without “I believe Your Dad delivers gifts at Christmas” being true.

(But what about Dretske’s notion of non-epistemic seeing, the kind of seeing that babies engage in? If a baby sees Your Dad and Santa Claus is Your Dad then the baby sees Your Dad. That isn’t intensional because it doesn’t pass the substitutivity test.)
- Intensionality is also a feature of sentences that are about phenomena other than intentionality.
  E.g. modal operators create intensional contexts
  
  The number of children in my family is 3
  3 is necessarily odd'
  “The number of children in my family is necessarily odd
  or
  The number of children in my family is 3
  The number of children in my family could have been larger than 3
  3 could have been larger than 3

- Intentionality and intensionality are not coextensive. Is there any interesting relationship between the two?

- A perspectival element to intentionality which often gives rise to intensionality…the mind’s access to the world is filtered through its representational capacities.
  
  o “Referential opacity”, “representation under an aspect”, “mode of presentation matters”

  “Intentionality is a much abused word and it means a variety of different things. But one thing it has been used to mean is some state, condition, activity or event whose description generates an opaque context, a context in which co-extensional terms cannot be automatically substituted for one another.” (Dretske p.493)

A tension: on the one hand, intentionality is understood as a capacity for mental states to be directed or about other things. On the other hand, mental representation seems in many ways to serve as a kind of screen between us and the world, in the sense that it is necessarily perspectival, and accompanied by a capacity for inaccuracy, and for concerning non-existent objects…

Recommended readings:

Crane, Tim, *Elements of Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), ch. 1 'Mind'.
