**Intentional Objects**

Where we left off:
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…

A fundamental feature of intentionality: mental states can be about non-existent objects, or states of affairs that do not pertain.

- He believes that my sister is cooler than me. [But I don’t have a sister!!!]
- I think that Pegasus is a winged horse
- I hope I’ll be given a unicorn for my birthday.

This has worried people for a long time…

- If we conceive of intentionality as a relation to an object, how can a mental state be about a non-existent object?
  - Either the relation needs to be special, or the objects need to be special (or both…)
- What distinguishes thoughts about different non-existent objects from one another?
  - What makes it the case that a group of people are all thinking about the same non-existent entity
  - Geach 1967 “Hob thinks a witch has blighted Bob’s mare, and Nob wonders whether she (the same witch) killed Cob’s sow.”
- What are intentional objects? What is it that you think about?

Tim Crane: a conflict between 3 propositions

1. All thoughts are relations between thinkers and the things which they are about
2. Relations entail the existence of their relata
3. Some thoughts are about things which do not exist.

How are we to resolve that tension?

**Option 1: Mental entities or ideas**

Preserves all three by modifying the sense in which these things are non-existent in (3)…

Problem: often it makes no sense if the objects we’re thinking about are mental entities.

Consider debates about whether God exists, or debates around where Santa Claus lives…

**Option 2: deny (2)**

Meinong: subsisting objects

There are non-existent objects which exemplify the properties attributed to them but which don’t exemplify the property of existing
Sorry what?

For any group of properties there is an object which instantiates those properties. Some of the resulting objects exist and some don’t.

How do you mean there “is” an object which doesn’t exist then?

Distinguishes between different categories of ontological status:

- **Existence**: material and temporal being of an object
- **Subsistence**: non spatio-temporal being
  - trees and houses can exist
  - numbers subsist, but cannot exist, even in principle
  - abstract objects subsist but do not exist

So existence is a *property* that can be predicated or withheld from an object (which reflects some aspects of our language use).

**Drawbacks**

- Heavyweight ontological commitments, at odds with the ontology of natural sciences
- Allows for impossible entities, like golden mountains and round squares, leading to contradictions e.g. “the round square is both round and not round” (it’s standard to treat impossibilities as trivially false).
  - Response: well beingless objects don’t have to obey the law of noncontradiction, only actual and possible objects do!
- Can seem as though it misses the point of non-existence (or existence) – it *isn’t* just a property like any other
- It’s still unclear what individuates non-actual objects.
  - Quine worries: are the possible skinny man in the doorway and the possible bald man in the doorway one, or are they two different possible men?

  Quine: “Wyman’s overpopulated universe is in many ways unlovely. It offends the aesthetic sense of us who have a taste for desert landscapes, but this is not the worst of it. Wyman’s slum of possibilities is a breeding ground for disorderly elements.”

**Russell’s theory of definite descriptions**

Treats definite and indefinite descriptions (the biggest unicorn, a wandering dragon) as incomplete symbols that are to be eliminated in favour of existential quantification and predicates…

E.g. The present king of France is bald = \( \exists x ((Kx \& \forall y (Ky \rightarrow y=x)) \& Bx) \)

(There exists an x such that x is the king of France and x is bald)

McGinn of a Russellian approach: “The thesis is that when you say that Bill Clinton exists you do not attribute to a certain *object* the property of existence, since there is no such property; what you do is say that some *property* is instantiated – where this property is not the property of existence itself but some other property to which you are alluding. Instead of attributing a property to an object you attribute a property to a property – the second-order property of having an instance…. You may try your hardest to focus on Clinton himself and ascribe to him the property of existence, but you cannot succeed in that endeavour, since the thought in question must always be to the effect that a
certain property has an instance—as it might be, the property of being a US president who was once governor of Arkansas”

Same for general existential thoughts: “when you think that tigers exist you do not think of certain feline objects that each has the property of existence; rather, you think, of the property of tigerhood, that it has instances” (McGinn again).

How does this diffuse the problem?
- Avoids the need to posit non-existent objects. When we say that something doesn’t exist, we’re saying that the property fails to have an instant. But we can say that without having to posit an object to do the non-existing
- Thoughts about non-existent objects are thoughts that some relevant property has an instant (or similar – tweak as required for the thought in question)
- Rightly construed as a denial of 1 rather than 2?

Costs
- Involves unnatural paraphrase of ordinary language: we can’t take it at face value

Option 3: Deny / equivocate over (1)
Searle’s “non-ontological” approach
John Searle notes points of similarity between intentional acts and speech acts, and on that basis encourages us to demistify intentional states by treating them as akin to speech acts (though he thinks that language is derived from intentionality, not vice versa)…

“an Intentional object is just an object like any other; it has no peculiar ontological status at all. To call something an Intentional object is just to say that it is what some Intentional state is about.”

“Intentional states represent objects and states of affairs in the same sense of “represent” that speech acts represent objects and states of affairs”

“to know what an intention is, or what any other Intentional state with a direct ion of fit is, we do not need to know its ultimate ontological category but rather we need to know: first, what are its conditions of satisfaction; second, under what aspect(s) are those conditions represented by the Intentional content; and third, what is the psychological mode – belief, desire, intention, etc. of the state in question? To know the second of these is already to know the first, since conditions of satisfaction are always represented under certain aspects…”

Tim Crane also has a deflationary approach:

“An intentional object is not a kind of object, but rather the intentional object of a thought T is what is given in answer to the question ‘what is T about?’ If this question has an answer, then the thought has an intentional object. … To say that an intentional object is real is to say that the phrase which gives the intentional object has a reference.” p.26 Elements of Mind

- Note the metalinguistic ascent, from inquiring into the intentional state itself to focusing our inquiring on how we talk about the intentional state.
- In thinking of mental states as akin to speech acts, we’re moving towards thinking of mental states as representational states…
- This deflationary approach can leave one feeling… deflated. It’s so simple! So easy! Why wasn’t this obvious all along? Why did there ever seem to be a problem? When does a “non-ontological” approach become an option?

**The Representational Theory of Mind…**
- Intentional states are relations to mental representations…
- Their intentionality can be understood in terms of the semantic properties of those representations
- To believe that my sister is cooler than me is to be appropriately related to a mental representation whose propositional content is that *my Sister is cooler than me*. To worry that my sister is cooler than me is to bear an appropriately different relation to that same content.
- Thinking / reasoning / inferring etc. can be understood as a sequence of representational states, where the (causal or rational) sequence between them can be explained in terms of semantic or syntactic properties of the states in question.

**Big left-over question**
How are we to understand linguistic content? Some things which work for language may work less well for belief…

**Possible worlds semantics**
- The semantic value of a sentence can be understood in terms of the truth value it takes across all possible worlds (or a set of possible worlds, the set in which it is true)
- The intension of a sentence is a function from possible worlds to truth values (that’s what you grasp when you understand a sentence: in what worlds would it be true?)

How do we get the fineness of grain right so that it reflects the perspectival nature of belief?
- Believers believe all necessary consequences of their beliefs (because they have the same truth value at all the same possible worlds as the initial content)
- Believers believe all mathematic truths e.g.

(See the Hartry field paper on this, and Robert Stalnaker’s Inquiry.)

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**Suggested Reading:**
- Searle, John, Intentionality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), ch. 1 'The nature of intentional states'.

**Further Reading:**