

Philosophy 136  
The Philosophy of Perception  
Handout 19  
Thursday 8 November 2005

1. *Two Sorts of Content*

Content as *propositional* content – what is expressed by a declarative sentence – *versus* content of consciousness – what is before the mind.

Cf. here Frege on the idea of ‘content of consciousness’ and William James:

...ideas are had. One has sensations, feelings, moods, inclinations, wishes. An idea which someone has belongs to the content of his consciousness. (G. Frege, ‘Thought’, in his *Collected Papers*.)

Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up into bits. Such words as ‘chain’ or ‘train’ do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A ‘river’ or a ‘stream’ are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life. (W. James, *The Principles of Psychology*, p.233.)

What is it to be aware of the propositional content of your mental state? It is to be able to determine what you think or what you desire: i.e. to know that you believe that there are more than fifteen chairs in Wheeler 110, or to know that you would like there to be more palm trees in Gordon Square. How might this apply to the case of perceptual experience, though?

2. *The Features of Intentionality (Again)*

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. (Franz Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, Book 2 Ch. 1, p. 88 in current Routledge translation.)

- (A) When *a* thinks of *b* and *b* exists, then *a* stands in a relation to *b*
- (B) When *a* thinks of *b* but there is really no such thing as *b*, *a* does not stand in a relation to any such thing as *b*
- (C) When thinking is the same kind of thing whether one is thinking of something which exists or not
- (D) If any instance of *F* is a relation between two things then all instances of *F* are relations

To what extent should a philosophical theory revise the way in which talk or think about the mind?

Perhaps we need just to note the ways in which we talk and the ways in which this can or cannot be accommodated within a theory of representation and language use.

The role of propositional content in the case of intentional objects.

(1) John wants a sloop

Either there is a particular boat which John craves, *or* John wants relief from slooplessness. In the latter case there is no determinate object that John is related to. We have, at best, what Anscombe calls an intentional object.

Instead we might look for a similarity with the following kind of case

- (1) Mike believes that there is a sleeping student in the class
- (2) There is a sleeping student Mike believes to be in the class
- (12\*)  $B(m, \langle \exists x SSx \wedge Cx \rangle)$
- (13\*)  $\exists x SSx \wedge B(m, \langle Cx \rangle)$

(3) John wants that he should possess a sloop

In seeing the ascription of desire as implicitly ascribing a propositional content to John's desire we can avoid asking about the existence or determinacy of the object of the desire. So there seems to be an ontological advantage to characterizing Intentionality in terms of *contents* rather than *objects*.

The point of thinking in terms of propositional attitudes even when no neat sentences of propositional attitude can be produced is that Intentional objects... lead almost inexorably to metaphysical excesses, and the characteristic of these objects that accounts for this is one that it can be argued serves precisely to show that Intentional objects are not any kind of objects at all. This characteristic is the dependence of Intentional objects on particular descriptions. (D. Dennett, *Content & Consciousness*, pp.28-9.)

### 3. *Intentionality and Propositional Attitudes*

The term 'propositional attitude' traces back to Russell and it implies that we are to understand the underlying metaphysics for belief or desire ascriptions as involving:

- i.) a subject;
- ii.) a relation, an *attitude* taken towards –
- iii.) a propositional content.

Beliefs and desires may share a content, yet differ in the attitude taken towards it. In believing that the sun is shining today, I have the attitude that the world is so; in desiring that the sun should shine today, I have the attitude that that is how the world should be.

### 4. *The Advantages of Propositional Attitudes*

If all of the psychological ascriptions which can involve empty terms or indeterminate objects can be construed as attitudes to propositions; then:

- a.) we can reject the supposition that the occurrence of the empty term or indefinite noun phrase in an ascription introduces a relatum which the subject is related to;
- b.) we can propose instead that it indicates in some manner what the propositional content of the psychological state is;
- c.) So propositional contents do not play the role that Reid criticises ideas for – they are not surrogates for the objects desired or thought about;
- d.) Rather by construing the psychological state as a propositional attitude we deny that it need have a relational form at all

### 5. *How Do Propositional Contents Relate to Perceptual Consciousness?*

According to the propositional attitude theory of desire when 'John wants a sloop' is true, then there is some desire state which John has which is directed towards a proposition: there is some state of affairs which John desires to be the case. John's desire has as an 'intentional object' what it does in virtue of its being directed towards that proposition.

When you have the visual experience of a tree, there is some object present to the mind, that to which you can direct your attention to. According to the intentional theory this is so in virtue of your experience being directed towards some proposition or intentional content which represents the environment as being some way.

Why suppose this?

Because you could experience in just this way in a case of hallucination where no appropriate physical object is present.

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