

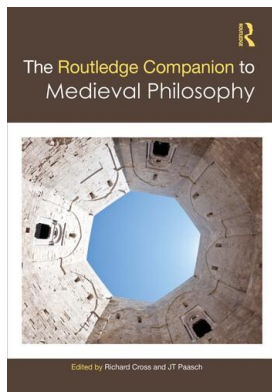
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INTENTIONALITY

Gyula Klima

As Brentano famously put it, intentionality “is the mark of the mental.” However, as this chapter is going to argue, the medieval notion of intentionality that Brentano is supposed to have revived did not play the role of demarcating mental from physical phenomena. A close analysis of the relevant medieval philosophical doctrines will show why the medievals did not really have to worry about this sort of demarcation or other related, apparently intractable problems of modern philosophies of mind.

Introduction: What Is Intentionality?

Nowadays, all philosophy students are supposed to know that the notion of intentionality represents a fundamental, distinctive feature of mental, as opposed to physical phenomena, namely, their intrinsic directedness to an object. By the lights of Brentano (1838–1917), who is primarily responsible for reintroducing the notion into modern psychology and philosophy of mind, intentionality is that uniquely mental characteristic which can serve to set aside mental from physical phenomena. In an often-quoted passage, he describes it in the following way:

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.

(1995: 88)

Thus, Brentano regards intentionality as “the mark of the mental,” which “is characteristic exclusively of mental phenomena. No physical phenomenon manifests anything like it” (ibid.: 89).

It is also supposed to be common knowledge that Brentano merely revived and re-appropriated for modern philosophical use an old scholastic concept, relying on medieval philosophers’ (especially Aquinas’s and his followers’) technical use of terms like *intentionalitas*, to characterize mental phenomena, and *esse intentionale*, better known in phenomenologist circles as “intentional inexistence,” to characterize the specific mode of existence that the objects of our mental acts are supposed to have in our mind.

This chapter is going to argue, especially on the basis of the works of Aquinas and the great medieval “promoter” of his ideas, Hervaeus Natalis, O.P. (c. 1250/60–1323, who was probably

the first medieval author to use the term *intentionalitas* in a strict technical sense), that despite certain similarities to the modern notion, the medieval notion did not have the function it does in modern philosophy; in particular, it definitely did not play the role of demarcating mental from physical phenomena.

However, as the chapter will argue further, looking more closely into the role the notion *does* play in the medieval characterizations of cognitive acts and their objects, we can find intriguing conceptual tools for handling some nagging issues in contemporary philosophy of mind, such as the problem of the ontological status of intentional objects, consciousness, the individuation of mental acts, and the dilemma of materialism versus dualism. In general, the discussion of the relevant scholastic doctrines will show why within their conceptual framework the scholastics did not have to worry about problems of “the mental” versus “the physical” as it is customary in modern philosophies of mind.

As I mentioned earlier, Hervaeus Natalis, the stout defender of the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas, both in his academic capacity and in his capacity first as the Provincial Superior in France (1309) and later as the Master General (1318) of the Dominican Order, was probably the first to use the term “intentionality” (or rather its Latin original *intentionalitas*) as a term of art, in his treatise *On Second Intentions*.

In order to understand what this work is about, we first need to understand the very phrase “second intention” in its title. As it turns out, even the apparently simple task of clarifying the meaning of the phrase calls for a number of distinctions. Having clarified in general that the name “intention” indicates a sort of tendency of something toward something else, Hervaeus establishes that this sort of tendency can be found both in the intellect and in the will toward their own intended objects. Thus, first, we have to distinguish between intentions of the will and intentions of the intellect. The former is the sense in which in the English vernacular, we most commonly speak about intentions, as when someone says that she takes philosophy classes because it is her intention to graduate, or when she says that her intention is to take philosophy to expand her intellectual horizon. The first example illustrates a volitional intention of the intended end (graduation), the second a volitional intention that is the same as the act of will (wanting to take philosophy) itself. However, these are *not* the intentions that Hervaeus’s treatise is primarily about; rather, he intends (volitionally) to discuss intentions of the intellect.

But, since an intention is a tending of something (in this case, of the intellect) toward something (its object), intellectual intentions can be considered either on the side of the intellect or on the side of its object. In the first way, any intellectual representation, such as an act of understanding or the intelligible species directing the act of understanding toward something, would be intentions. But then again, these are *not* the intentions with which Hervaeus is primarily concerned. Even among these, namely, among intellectual intentions on the side of the intellect, one can nevertheless draw the distinction between first and second intentions, the first intentions being those that concern things that are not intentions, and the second intentions being those that concern first intentions *qua* intentions. In the second way, that is, on the side of an object of the intellect, an intention can be taken again in two ways: either materially, in a concrete manner, in which way it is nothing but the object understood whatever it is, or formally, and in an abstract manner, in which way it is the relation of the object understood to the act of understanding itself. But then again, depending on whether the object understood (a) is a thing that is not an intention or (b) an intention itself, the intention is a first intention or a second intention, respectively. So, finally, it is intentions in this sense that are Hervaeus’s main concern, namely, the relations of being intended by the intellect, pointing from an object that itself is an intention to the act of the intellect whereby it is understood.

But then, having clarified what intentions in the strictest sense are, whether first or second intentions, it is clear that for Hervaeus, they are named “intentions” from their relational property,

which is properly referred to by the term “intentionality.” Thus, *intentionality* in the strict sense intended by Hervaeus is nothing but the object of a cognitive act taken formally, namely, the relation of the object to the act itself, that is to say, the *object's being intended by the act*. As Hervaeus puts it with regard to an act of thought and its object:

Intentionality is neither the act of thought itself, nor its relation to the intelligible <object>. It remains, therefore, that it is the relation of the thing thought of to the act of thought, which is a mere relation of reason, which in turn is only a being of reason.¹

So, in stark contrast to Brentano's notion, Hervaeus's notion of intentionality is not a distinctive property of psychological acts, a relation pointing toward the immanent object of those acts; rather, it is the relational property of any object of any cognitive act, pointing from the object to the act itself. How come? What are these objects? How do they acquire this relational property? And what is the point of Hervaeus's insistence that this relation is a mere relation of reason, a being of reason in itself?

Cognitive Acts and Their Objects

Since intentionality pertains to the objects of cognitive acts on account of being targeted by those cognitive acts, we should start answering these questions by taking a quick look at these acts themselves. When we are talking about cognitive acts in the context of Aristotelian psychology, we mean acts of our cognitive faculties, namely, senses and intellect. The senses are not only the five external senses, distinguished as such by Aristotle, but also the inner senses: common sense, which integrates the information streaming in through the external senses into the cognition of recognizable and re-identifiable individual objects; memory, which stores the information integrated by the common sense in the form of phantasms, the singular representations of singular objects of experience; imagination, which is capable of recombining the various features of objects of the senses represented by the phantasms; and the estimative power in brute animals, instinctively evaluating the objects of the senses with regard to danger or pleasure, corresponding to the *vis cogitativa* in humans, which collates the singular representations of singulars for recognition, distinction, and identification, preparing the sensory information for further processing by the intellect. The intellect, however, takes all the sensory information amassed in sensory memory in the form of phantasms and prepares the first universal representations characteristic of the human intellect, namely, the *intelligible species*, in the process of abstraction, by retaining what is common to a large number of singulars under different accidental circumstances, and disregarding (though *without excluding*) what is peculiar to each. In this function, namely, in preparing the intelligible species, the intellect is acting as the so-called agent intellect (*nous poietikos, intellectus agens*). However, insofar as it becomes activated by these species and as it uses them for the further intellectual operations of concept formation, judgment formation, and reasoning, it is called the possible or potential or receptive intellect (*nous pathetikos, intellectus possibilis*, not to be confused with the *intellectus passibilis*, which is just the cogitative power referred to by a different name).

This brief survey of Aristotelian cognitive faculty psychology should remind us that each faculty distinguished here is just part and parcel of Aristotle's functionalist analysis of cognitive operations performed by us, humans, and in part by other animals as well. Accordingly, since the distinction of these faculties is based on their function, i.e. what kinds of specific feats they achieve in cognizing and recognizing objects of our experience and beyond, this type of analysis does not have to presuppose any sort of “heavy” ontological claims about the objects or about the ontological status or structure of the cognitive faculties themselves. All these faculties are described in terms of what they *do*, rather than in terms of what they *are*; hence, that question may remain a

matter of further discussion. These faculties may be just any sorts of information processing units, whether they are physically realized in the “hardware” of silicon chips or in the “wetware” of neural tissue, or, for that matter, in the “vaporware” of some purely spiritual, immaterial medium, whatever that may be, if anything at all.

Of course, one might think that describing the distinction of cognitive powers and operations in terms of the newly minted lingo of information processing units is just a vain attempt to make an antiquated theory look more attractive to a contemporary audience raised on this jargon. But just as it is useless to put lipstick on a pig, so it is in vain to try to “sell” Aristotle dressed up as your info-tech expert.

However, such an objection actually has its history backward. Aristotle’s entire hylomorphist system of metaphysics, physics, and psychology is arguing about the existence, essence, powers, and function of the various sorts of entities required to channel the flow of energy and information coming from the Prime Mover down to the movements of celestial bodies, which by the influx of their light churn up the elements of the sublunary world informing its matter in the various ways in which different combinations of this mixture are capable of receiving, storing, transmitting, and further processing this influx of energy, leading to the various cycles of generation and corruption of living things, part of which is some organisms’, namely, animals’ capability to receive vital sensory information about their narrower or broader environment, and process it for the sake of various forms of adaptation to that environment, and an even more specific part of which is some such animals’, namely humans’, ability to further process this information by the power of reason to garner information even about things that are beyond their sensible environment, including the existence of the Prime Mover itself and its role in sustaining the order of this sensible reality.

This one-sentence sketch of the “grand vision” of Aristotelian hylomorphism should at least provide some motivation to suspect why medieval Aristotelians, in particular Aquinas and Hervaeus, thinking in this framework, did not have to bother much about the distinction between “the mental” and “the physical,” and did not have to think of intentionality as “the mark of the mental,” opposing it to “the physical.” After all, if *both* physics and cognitive psychology are primarily about what we would call the thermodynamic principles of receiving, storing, transmitting, and further processing energy and information, then, even if psychological processes may have their specific characteristics, whatever *those* are, they should not be anything diametrically opposed to “the physical,” whatever *that* is supposed to be. This supposed opposition between and hence the need for a precise demarcation of “the mental” and “the physical” is simply the historical result of a rather restricted, mechanistic view of physics, on the one hand, and the similarly restricted, possibly solipsistic, primarily introspective, post-Cartesian view of psychology on the other.

But of course, the devil is in the details. So, let us see in some further detail how the scholastic Aristotelian notion of intentionality, as part and parcel of a hylomorphist cognitive psychology, physics, and metaphysics, can steer clear of many of the lures and snares of post-Cartesian dualistic physics and psychology that contemporary philosophy of mind and cognitive science are still challenged by.

Cognitive Acts and the Intentional Being of Their Objects

For Aristotelians, cognition starts with sensation. The Aristotelian hylomorphist idea of what sensation consists in is encapsulated in Aristotle’s paradigmatic example of the signet ring and its impression in a piece of wax. Just as the shape of the ring impressed upon the wax informs the wax, which receives and preserves this information without becoming another ring having the same shape itself, so do the sensible qualities of sensible objects inform the senses that receive, and in more advanced animals store this information for further processing, without becoming

qualified by those qualities themselves. There are a number of important points to note in this paradigmatic example.

- 1 The impression in the wax is *both* the *physical* shape of the wax and the *intentional* shape of the ring. It is definitely not the physical shape of the ring, which, of course, stayed in the ring informing in physical being its gold after making the impression just as it did before. However, the impression of the ring in the wax is still the same shape in the sense that it is an exact copy of the shape of the ring, modeled after it, encoding by its depressions and elevations the (negative of) the depressions and elevations of the shape of the ring in a reproducible form. This is what the scholastics referred to as the wax now having the shape of the ring in *esse intentionale* or even in *esse spirituale*, as contrasted with the same form's *esse reale* in the ring. Note that accordingly, there is nothing "spooky" about *esse spirituale* in this sense: indeed, it does not have to be even immaterial; the *esse spirituale* of a form in a subject is merely contrasted with its *esse reale* in the object on account of the real form informing the object in real being, whereas the intention merely informing the subject *about* the object, without informing the subject in real being.²
- 2 Accordingly, a form's inexistence in a subject in *esse intentionale* is nothing but an object's form in *esse reale* being encoded by the subject's form informing the subject in *esse reale*. So, the real form of the subject, as long as it encodes the real form of an object, is an intentional form of the object in the subject. It is on account of this intentional form or simply intention of the subject that the object becomes characterized by intentionality, thereby becoming itself the intended object of this intention in the subject.
- 3 The real form of the subject which is the intention of an object is an intention merely on account of encoding information about the form of its object. Therefore, just any information-carrying form is an intention in any subject, whether it is alive or not and whether it is conscious of this information or not, which is why Aquinas regularly talks about the intentions of colors being in the air in *esse intentionale*. Accordingly, consciousness or even being alive is not required for an intentional state. Intentions are merely information states, some of which are had by living organisms, some of which are processed by their vital mechanisms in adapting to their environment, and some of which, in turn, are actually processed with high priority, that is to say, with the degree of attention required for consciousness.
- 4 Finally, it is clear that intentions on the part of our cognitive faculties can survive or even precede their objects (as does the impression of the old ring, and the mold for a new one); so, the existence of the object is generally not required for (indeed, sometimes it is even excluded by) the existence of its intention; thus, intentions can naturally concern non-existent objects. The objects of our intentions are just whatever these intentions encode information about, but depending on the kind of cognitive act that forms the intention, the object may be required to be present (as in the case of sensation), past (as in the case of remembering), future (as in the case of anticipation or expectation), merely possible (as in the case of imagination), or even represented without any difference of time and space (as in the case of understanding). But just because something is understood without any difference of space and time, it does not mean that it *is* without any such difference, indeed, not any more than remembering something that existed in the past would mean that somehow it retains some weird mode of being in the past, so that it is somehow still there for us to return to and interact with. This is precisely the point of Hervaeus's insistence that intentionality is a mere relation of reason, which means that what such a relation relates to a cognitive act may be ontologically absolutely nothing, although there is something very real in our mind that it is related to. Accordingly, it should be clear that the intended objects of the intentions on the part of our cognitive faculties do not have to form a separate ontological realm of "weird entities" that may have

mere being or subsistence, but no existence, *à la* Meinong. Our cognitive intentions in our cognitive faculties may concern objects that on account of being intended have intentionality, but for an intended object to have intentionality is not like for it to have a color or a shape; it is rather for it to be represented by an intention carrying information about it, which may carry the information that it has, had, will have, or could have a color or a shape, or for that matter the information that it has none of these, or some other information without any of these.

Intentionality and the Individuation of Cognitive Acts and Objects

Intentionality, therefore, the relation of being intended by a cognitive act on the part of the object, establishes a logically necessary connection between a cognitive act and its object; it is the *logical glue* that ties them together, so much so that the individuation of the one is logically tied to the individuation of the other. What this means is that, say, act a_1 , insofar as it is the intention on the part of the subject, can only have object o_1 as its intended object, in such a way that one cannot swap out o_1 for o_2 , without thereby swapping out a_1 for a_2 . Since a_1 *qua* the intention of o_1 is nothing but o_1 in *esse intentionale* in the subject, swapping out o_1 for o_2 is *eo ipso* swapping out a_1 for a_2 , despite the fact that ontologically o_1 and a_1 are distinct items.

However, that ontological distinctness simply means that the *ontological carrier* or *realizer* of a_1 , whether it is “hardware,” “wetware,” or “vaporware,” is merely contingently identical with a_1 . That is to say, a_1 , *qua* intention, has conditions of identity, tied to the identity of its object, other than the carrier realizing it.

This is why, to use Hilary Putnam’s example (1981), the portrait of Churchill modeled by an artist after Churchill’s face is Churchill’s portrait, actually carrying information about Churchill’s features, whereas the exact same shape resulting from the random crawling of an ant in the sand is not. For the ant’s crawling is not part of a system of encoding transferring information from Churchill’s features into the sand, whereas the artist’s drawing is.

Were the ant’s crawling driven by a bionic tracing mechanism, say, some face scanner sending information to a computer that would, in turn, send signals to a processor driving the ant’s muscle contractions to move the ant along a trajectory that traces the features of Churchill’s face, it *would* encode information about Churchill’s face; so it *would* then be Churchill’s face in *esse intentionale* in the sand.

Note that it is the *same shape* that in the former scenario *merely looks like* Churchill’s face in *esse intentionale*, while *it isn’t*, whereas in the latter scenario *it is*, depending on its relation to its object, Churchill’s face in *esse reale*. This is what it means to say that the conditions of identity of intentions are not the same as the conditions of identity of their carriers. The conditions of identity of intentions are determined extrinsically, whereas those of their carriers are determined intrinsically.

In fact, this is the whole point of Herveaeus’s notion of intentionality being primarily a relation pointing *backward*, as it were, *from the object toward the subject*: the individuation of the act of the subject is tied to the individuation of the object, and *not* the other way around as in modern philosophy. This simple observation has an array of far-reaching consequences, both historically and theoretically, which I will for now simply lay out for your further consideration.

Given the “hyper-externalist” conception of intentionality outlined here,³ tying by logical necessity the individuation of cognitive acts to the individuation of their objects, there is no logical possibility for a cognitive subject to have the same cognitive acts with the variation of the identity of their objects. But this is in stark contrast to all post-Cartesian, indeed, some late medieval nominalist conceptions of the identity conditions of mental acts, which would hold the direct opposite, namely, that the identity of their objects is determined by the identity conditions of the mental

acts themselves, whose identity is determined by what sorts of entities they are. Accordingly, on this “modern” conception, it is perfectly possible for a cognitive subject to have exactly the same mental acts regardless of what happens to their external objects, whether due to the manipulations of God, an omnipotent deceiver, a mad scientist, or just the rebellious robots of the Matrix.

To be sure, the mental acts of these subjects, being what they are, would still exhibit intentionality, and point toward some *immanent, phenomenal* objects. But since the identity of these phenomenal objects is determined *immanently* by the intrinsic properties of the cognitive act, they are at most *logically contingently* identical to any external objects, or possibly to none at all. Accordingly, the in-principle undetectable deception of the Cartesian Demon-scenario becomes a logical possibility, dictating the retreat to the only remaining certainty, namely, the solipsistic certainty of the Cartesian *ego*. But this is precisely how the anemic Cartesian *ego* or Lockean *self* as the seat of consciousness of a possibly merely phenomenal reality is carved out from the flesh-and-blood Scholastic-Aristotelian human person, having both feet planted firmly in physical reality, yet by means of reason reaching up beyond this material reality into the immaterial—yet just as real—realm of purely spiritual reality.

Notes

- 1 Hervaeus (2008): “intentionalitas non est ipse actus intelligendi nec eius habitudo ad intelligibile. Relinquitur ergo quod sit habitudo ipsius rei intellectae ad actum intelligendi, quae est ratio secundum rationem tantum et dicit tantum ens secundum rationem.”
- 2 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 56, a. 2, ad 3 (1963):

Ad tertium dicendum quod unus Angelus cognoscit alium per speciem eius in intellectu suo existentem, quae differt ab Angelo cuius similitudo est, non secundum esse materiale et immateriale, sed secundum esse naturale et intentionale. Nam ipse Angelus est forma subsistens in esse naturali, non autem species eius quae est in intellectu alterius Angeli, sed habet ibi esse intelligibile tantum. Sicut etiam et forma coloris in pariete habet esse naturale, in medio autem deferente habet esse intentionale tantum.
- 3 For more on this idea of “hyper-externalism,” see Klima (2015).

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