

# Do Only Mental States Have Intentionality?

Sinclair Liang

Philosophy

## Sections

1. What is Intentionality
2. Theories on Intentionality
3. Intentionality and Natural Languages

## What is Intentionality

In the area of philosophy of mind, intentionality has been the central topic amongst various branches. Intentionality is a technical term in philosophy, with little to do with the English word “intentional”, and rather different from the word in common linguistic usage. Intentionality means the directions to things our minds point to. Intentionality is rather something more familiar to us all: a characteristic feature of our mental states. As we are conscious agents in this physical world, surrounded by tangible objects, actual events and sensible environments, we also invoke immaterial mental concepts, even for things we have never seen or sensed before, of ourselves and other people. Many instances in our thoughts, beliefs, hopes, wishes, fears and so on have this characteristic feature which we call intentionality: a direction to something, or being *about* something. By setting up such a “pointer” like relation, we thus understand or grasp the sense of our world. Here are some examples of closely examined mental states in the language that describes Intentionality:

1. When I see a dog, my perception of such a dog invokes some kinds of thought that make me think *about* my dog back home.
2. When I am finishing Engineering assignments that involve numbers on Integrals, I am thinking *of* certain values, some permanent values represented by such symbols.

3. When I am hoping that CoronaVirus will not disrupt our school schedule in the near future, I am thinking about some possible future state of the external world.

There are infinitely many examples we can examine, but we have the idea of what we mean by saying Intentionality in philosophy now. Simply put: The mind's being "of" or "about" something is intentionality.

### Theories on Intentionality

We cannot talk about Intentionality without mentioning who brought this term into philosophy: Franz Brentano. Best known for having introduced the notion into the field, Brentano's first thesis is that no "physical phenomenon" has intentionality. Brentano's second thesis is that intentionality is the mark of the mental: all and only mental states/events have intentionality. By "physical phenomena", Brenta did not mean psychological processes, but mainly perceptible properties. Such properties include some of our immediate sensations: "colour, sound and warmth". Most philosophers claim that such a thesis is *too* strong. Questions mostly are raised on the second part of what he stands: "All and only...have intentionality", however, we all have experienced some "purposeless sensations" such as headache, itchiness, sudden pain or dizziness, all of which do not point to or are *about* or *of* something else. If a sensation is not about something else, it can hardly be characterized as intentionality.

According to Nes' paper *Are Only Mental Phenomena Intentional?* along with many popular objections towards Brentano's thesis, similar to which I previously mentioned, the objection lies on *the necessity* of such mental states. Nes wrote

“since bodily sensations, or moods, or other states of mind regarded as 'qualitative', are not intentional.<sup>1</sup> (Nes, Pg. # 206)” It seems that the question really needs an answer is if there are directions our bodily sensations can point to. This debate continues even to this day in the philosophy community. If we take a step back and look around us, signs such as words, sounds and pictures, though being purely non-mental external objects, do display intentionality. They *simply* derive meaning from the intentionality of the minds that produced them in the first place. The same approach can be easily applied back to bodily sensation puzzles, which I mentioned previously. How do we know we commonly sense the same feeling when we are sad or happy or so on? The answer I can offer is by describing the facial features or movements. When we frown or laugh, the perceivers of such facial expressions or sounds they produced will receive the mental states from which they are produced. If some person cannot stand straight and falls over when he/she is walking, we can be very safe in assuming such a person is expressing dizziness in their bodily sensations. Do they carry *aboutness* of something else? Yes and no, the messages or content such bodily sensations are mental states insofar there is another person receives such signal emitting from the behaviors caused by such sensations.

When Husserl took up Brentano's theory, he founded a branch of philosophy of mind known as phenomenology. Husserl does not agree with the answer I previously proposed. Moods or internal sensations are not always about or of something. Guess I was not wrong, I said “yes and no”. Husserl's interest is in those and only

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<sup>1</sup> Oudlaan and Rotterdam, “Are Only Mental Phenomena Intentional?”

those mental states that actually give us a sense of an object, thus those are intentional.

### Intentionality and Natural Languages

It seems to me, what Husserl means to say is “signs only carry intentionality to only some people, for those who can understand and derive mental states from their representations.” In this view, all signs, especially natural languages will lose all intrinsic contents unless they are conferred and perceived by people who practise them. Their intentionality, their representing, is therefore not a sign of having intrinsic values. Take the example below. Figure 1 shows a word in Arabic. Without any prior knowledge in Arabic language, it means nothing more but a series of squiggles to me. I could not even type them, write them or pronounce them. Apparently it carries the same meaning of a *chair* in English, though how broad and the extent of such a word in Arabic compared to English remains effortly ambiguous.



(Fig. 1)

How am I, as someone that has no prior interactions with Arabic language, supposed to remotely comprehend the value of this word? The answer is simply I can not. This proves that natural languages do not carry intrinsic values. This chair word clearly carries content and has intentionality to people who can recognize this “series of squiggles”. This means Brentano’s thesis is at least partially wrong: Intentionality is

exhibited by non-mental things, though not universally. I do not wish to turn my paper, which should be philosophical, into a linguistic analysis on various linguistic communities.

Let us take a closer look at the issue of necessity of non-mental objects and their intentionality. Philosopher Ruth Millikan picked up and continues with such advancements, focusing largely on natural language. Millikan's influential proposal is the so-called *Biosesemantic* approach. Echoed with what seems a possible explanation of "non-mental signs only have meaning to some groups of people", Millikan's approach rests on two basic assumptions.

[The] first of which is that (unlike a natural sign) an intentional representation is a relatum in a three-place relation involving two mechanisms: a producer of the representation and a consumer, both of which are cooperative devices whose activities are beneficial to both. Millikan's second assumption is that Brentano's relation of intentional inexistence is exhibited by biological functions.<sup>2</sup>

For instance, given any organs we have inside of us, there ought to be a biological purpose it will fulfill, if it works in a correct way. The example Millikan cites is a mammal's heart; its chief function is to pump blood, though it might fail to do so under some circumstances. However, biological functions do not ipso facto display any specific intentionality, at least not in Brentano's sense. A heart or a liver is never

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<sup>2</sup> Jacob, "Intentionality."

*about* or *of* anything. Millikan's main claim is having a heart or whatever organs to survive is never *about* anything, but necessary. Nothing can have intentionality unless it has what Millikan calls a *proper* function. In other words, nothing has an intentionality unless it results from some historical process of selection or other. "[...]functions that have helped account for the survival and proliferation."<sup>3</sup>

In spoken human languages the producer is the speaker, the sign is what is spoken, the consumer is the listener. Thus, according to Millikan's Biosemantics theory, the source of intentionality mostly depends on the outcome that aids the survival. However, this also carries out another question: How do abstract ideas have the ability to carry intentionality if they have no obvious survival values?

Abstract ideas can indeed have very detailed descriptions, but they do not map to any tangible objects observable. Take the example of a unicorn, we have a very clear image of what a unicorn might look like but we can not find a real unicorn that can be mapped from our mental representations. Or mathematical equations, how do we come to a consensus of numbers? If I understand Millikan in the right way, Millikan pretty much kicks the question back to natural history and history: Given enough time, with enough time and practices, we will most likely evolve abstract ideas. Millikan's go-to example is the Bee Dance example: Bees are not capable of natural languages, but they do convey messages with abstract ideas by performing certain moves to fellow bees.

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<sup>3</sup> Millikan, "Thoughts Without Laws; Cognitive Science with Content."

In Millikan's book *Language, Thought, and Other Biological Categories: New Foundations for Realism*, Millikan expressed "But intentionality, I will argue, is not a clean-cut phenomenon. (Millikan, Pg. #86)"<sup>4</sup> It seems to me that Millikan refers the intentionality problem to a mapping problem. Is there a mapping from our thoughts to actual objects in the physical world? Millikan would most likely decline an existence of such mapping relation: In Millikan's theory, when the relevant representation is used to communicate between creatures, the producer and the consumer of the representation are different creatures. In other words, it is a purely evolutionary and historic agreement between the producer and the consumer. To find out the content of a representation, in Millikan's theory, we look at the functions of its consumers, which are co-adapted with the producing systems.

If Millikan's theory can indeed offer an explanation of meanings, contents and intentionality, then as philosophers we can just take a break and let Natural Scientists to figure out our subject. However, I do not agree with Millikan. Millikan misrepresents the role of proper function in establishing references amongst objects. We cannot simply say "evolution" bridged the gap from *no meaning* to *some meaning* without any enlightenments.

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<sup>4</sup> Press, "Language, Thought, and Other Biological Categories | The MIT Press."

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