

## Intentionality is not Representation

### Abstract

Descartes initiated representationalism which led into idealism. It was Franz Brentano who overcame idealism by finding an alternative to representationalism (call it “Brentano's Revolution”). Brentano's Slogan could have been: Intentionality is neither mental action, nor mental representation. Unfortunately, his topic of intentionality was introduced into mainstream analytical philosophy in representationalist terms ignoring his revolution completely.

### *1. Representationalism and Idealism*

Representationalism has a bad reputation among contemporary analytical philosophers. Nevertheless, all mainstream analytical philosophers think representational, mostly without noticing it. That is due to two circumstances: firstly, they are linguistic philosophers and language is a representation. Secondly, four hundred years of representationalist and in its wake idealist thinking do not vanish without trace.

The key notion of traditional representationalism is “idea”. Therefore, it is also called “ideaism”. Some speak of “the new way of ideas” relating it to Plato's old way of ideas. It was Descartes who began the new way of ideas. Like Plato's Descartes' ideas are first of all natures of things. Secondly, however, Descartes' ideas are always mental unlike Plato's. The designation “representationalism” derives from the role attributed to ideas of mentally representing things.

Some scholars protest that in Descartes ideas are not representatives of things which serve as surrogates.<sup>1</sup> Rather, ideas present us the object (in the sense of phenomenologists) as being so and so. Thus, it is the way the object is *for us*. That is just the confused concept of appearance of idealism, the heir of representationalism. If one gets to the bottom of appearances, it turns out that they are nothing but representations in the mind.

It is true that Descartes takes ideas to serve as means to get at the

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<sup>1</sup> D. Perler: *Repräsentation bei Descartes*. Frankfurt am Main 1996

objects. He is not an idealist. Ideas do not become the proper objects as in idealism. But ideas and the knowledge of ideas are critical for the knowledge of things. Descartes' famous criterion of evidence is applicable to ideas only. Thus ideas inevitable become primary objects even in the cognition of the non-mental and also representatives of those (more distant) objects. The mediation view of cognition characterises representationalism. Cognition is taken always to involve a medium, a representation to which one has to attend. Cognition is thought to be nothing but the representation of the object.

The main difficulty of representationalism concerns the relation between representation and object. Descartes and his disciples consider causation and similarity. With respect to the knowledge of physical objects Descartes rules out similarity because he takes the mental and the physical to be radically different. He assumes a causal transaction between the physical object and certain semi-physical entities in the mind. But the causal chain from object to mind seemed neither to him nor to the Cartesians a satisfactory candidate for the basic cognitive relation. The latter remained a mystery and that created scepticism. Scepticism is a position concerning the realism issue, i.e., the question whether we know the world as it is in itself independently of our cognition. This question has to be answered on the basis of one's categorial analysis of cognition.

The empiricist analysis of Gassendi, Locke and Hume was an attempt to avoid the realism issue and to concentrate on what is given: the ideas in the mind. Locke is always vague on the relationship between ideas and objects. Sometimes he identifies ideas and qualities of physical objects and physical objects with complexes of ideas. That identification which Berkeley and Hume adopt is Kant's starting point. He claims that the physical objects we perceive are mere appearances, i.e., ideas in the mind produced by it and he does not shy away from the contention that that is in accordance with common sense and from calling his view realistic (empirical realism).

Kant pretends to be able to finally lay scepticism (which was, as we have seen, the legacy of representationalism) to rest and prove the existence of the external world by taking space and time as subjective, i.e., as forms of perceptual representation. He upholds that there is something non-mental (the thing in itself), which he assumes to be the cause of sense data in the mind. However, he takes it to be absolutely unknowable. Thus, the physical objects with which we are acquainted by perception are turned into mental objects and the thing-in-itself cannot be conceived of as

physical in any customary sense, if only because it is unknowable.

Kant is not a representationalist any more since he does not consider the non-mental as an object of knowledge and since he transforms the physical objects into mental objects and thus into objects with which are directly acquainted. Thus he holds all knowledge to be direct knowledge. In this way, he escapes from the impasse into which the representationalist theory of knowledge leads. And he is able to claim that a priori knowledge though being self-knowledge of mind is knowledge about the physical objects.

Kant dissolves the realism problem by turning physical into mental objects and non-mental objects into unknowables. He is convinced that he solved the problems of representationalism and overcame scepticism. However, his solution of turning the physical into a mental object and making knowing into a purely mental production with only a loose causal connection to a non-mental „I know not what“(Locke's characterisation of an Aristotelian substance) is absurd.

The connection between mind and physical object on which the empiricists base their analysis is causal. They understand perception as a causation of ideas by objects and their test of validity of an idea is to trace it back causally to perceptual ideas (sensations). However, since we know only the last link of the causal chain, we know nothing about that causation and therefore have no ground for inference to the physical object. Hence, Kant, who draws the final consequences from representationalism does not admit the non-mental as an object of knowledge, although he sticks to it as the first cause of perception. He grounds the validity of knowledge wholly on the process of knowing which he takes to produce its object in the first place.

Being primarily a practical philosopher, Kant has the stomach to swallow such a subjectivist theory of knowledge. But a philosopher who strives for a tenable realism has not. Kant's so-called Copernican revolution which should rather be called Ptolemeian revolution (because it places the subject in the centre) amounts in his eyes to complete failure. Kant's theory of knowledge is clearly subjectivist (he equates objectivity with intersubjectivity), while epistemological realism is objectivist. Considering this opposition and the absurdity of the idealistic transformation of the physical into a mental object, the philosopher who strives to realism and sees that representationalism leaves mind and physical object unconnected or leads into idealism has all reason absolutely to avoid representationalism and to be on his guard against hidden

representationalist premises.

## *2. Brentano's Revolution*

In the 19th century it was Brentano who gave the movement towards objectivity and epistemological realism, away from idealist subjectivism, a decisive momentum. He wanted to make a new start in philosophy, a new start from scratch, i.e., from phenomena not in the Kantian sense of mere appearances, but in the sense in which natural scientists' use the term. First, he focuses his phenomenological research on the classification of phenomena and he finds that there is a basic difference between psychical and physical phenomena. After British empiricists and idealists who dominated philosophy had blurred and dissolved that distinction, that finding was a revolutionary step. As the essential feature of psychical phenomena Brentano notes intentionality, i.e. the directedness to an object. That was not new. It was new that intentionality is closely investigated. Before all, Brentano brings out the difference between the mental act and its object, which is also blurred by empiricism and idealism (in both views knowing and the known are more or less fused which was made easier by the process-product ambiguity of the term "presentation" (*Vorstellung*)). However, Brentano's most important innovation is the discovery of the intentional relation. It makes him focus on the ontology of relations. Brentano's ontology of relations develops with respect to intentionality, especially with respect to the circumstance that mental acts can stand in the intentional relation to non-existent objects or, rather, that the second relatum may be lacking. First, Brentano takes the view that genuine relations require the existence of all their relata and that intentionality is merely similar to a relation in contrast to relations of comparison such as 'louder'. Later, he arrives at the view that relations of comparisons are no genuine relations and that intentionality is a model relation.

Against the idealists Brentano's revolution consisted in his distinction between act and object, against representationalism it was the widening of the range of alternatives with respect to the cognitive connection to the non-mental. The representationalists took in to account only the whole-part relation (in the case of the knowledge of the mental), the similarity and the causal relation, while Brentano discovered a specific relation which holds only between mental act and their objects.

### 3. Representationalism in Mainstream Analytical Philosophy

One of the main themes of Quine's Word and Object is the rejection of ideas and the consequences of such a rejection for epistemology. The consequences are sceptical, as were those of the assumption of ideas. And the reason for this similarity is clearly that Quine continues to think representationalist. Quine's representatives are concepts instead of ideas. He does not use the term "concept" in the traditional sense of definite and clear ideas but means linguistic types by it.

Putnam's influential distinction between internal and metaphysical realism also depends on a linguistic representationalism.<sup>2</sup> It took a Spanish physicist to make Putnam realise his representationalism.<sup>3</sup> In his philosophical zigzag Putnam thought later on to have arrived at a direct realism. But his view reminds strongly of the Kantian view rather than being realist. He wants to guard against a representation as "an interface between ourselves and what we think about" (alias "idea") and rely instead on the activity of representation.<sup>4</sup> This activity is not like Brentano's mental act with the intentional relation but like Kant's spontaneous act of synthesis or the later Husserl's act of objectification, since Putnam clearly implies that the activity makes an intentional relation superfluous and that it produces the cognitive connection with the object.

Putnam rarely uses the term "intentionality" but Searle made it even the title of a book. He has the merit of introducing the subject of intentionality into mainstream analytical philosophy, which was courageous, indeed. Still he is as far from Brentano and did learn as little from Brentano as Putnam. Searle prefers "mental state" to Brentano's "mental acts" but the term "act" plays a role in Searle's analysis of intentionality. Searle professes that in it he extended his theory of speech acts to mind. This theory continues Austin's approach who investigated "how to do things with words". Hence Searle's concept of acts is that of an action or activity. Brentano contrasted mental acts to actions, especially to the mental activity of the idealist which is taken to produce the objects. As to the connection between mental act/state and object Searle says that the

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2 cf. E. Tegtmeier: Realismus und Pragmatismus. Eine Kritik der Erkenntnistheorie Hilary Putnams, in: V. Gadenne (ed.) Kritischer Rationalismus und Pragmatismus. Amsterdam 1998

3 s. M. Willaschek (ed.) Realismus. Paderborn 2000, p. 129

4 s. H. Putnam: Sense, Nonsense, and the Sense: An Inquiry into the Powers of the Human Mind. *Journal of Philosophy* 91 (1994) p. 505

former represents the latter “in the same sense of “represent” in which speech acts represent.<sup>5</sup> He collects what is represented with the notions of objects and states of affairs. And he characterises them with respect to linguistic as well as with respect to mental representation as conditions of satisfaction. That a mental state *m* represents the state of affairs *s* or has *s* as the condition of satisfaction does not imply that *m* acquaints with *s*. Being in a mental state which represents the state of affairs *s* does not imply being acquainted with *s*. Acquaintance with *s* involves knowing whether the state of affairs holds. Not even understanding what a mental state represents or what its conditions of satisfaction are does involve that acquaintance. In Searle intentionality is a representation of the object by a third entity (the content of the mental state) and not as in Brentano an acquaintance with the object. Brentano's intentional relation between act and object is taken to be so close, as to allow the metaphorical phrase of the object “being in” the act. It is presumably because of this close connection that Brentano denies the act has besides its object also a content.

Searle expresses uneasiness with the terms “representation” and “represent” and he claims that he could in principle dispense with them.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, he uses them at crucial points. It seems to me that he is not successful in his attempt to distance himself from representationalism. It is not enough to emphasise that the contents of mental states are not pictures. Descartes or Locke's ideas were neither. Moreover, it is revealing and typically representationalist that Searle requires the mental state to fit or match the world.<sup>7</sup> We have here similarity playing the role of basic cognitive relation between mind and object. Similarity did play that role also in empiricist representational realism where it offered a categorial analysis of the connection between mind and world.

It is regrettable the opportunity of introducing the subject of intentionality into mainstream analytical philosophy as not seized also to make Brentano's revolution known. Still worse is that mainstream analytical philosophers tend to present Brentano, if the mention he at all, as a representationalist.<sup>8</sup> If Brentano knew he would turn in his grave. One

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5 s. J.R.Searle: *Intentionality*. Cambridge 1983, p.4

6 s. Searle 1983, p.11f.

7 s. Searle 1983, p. 7, 9

8 e.g. A. Beckermann: *Das Problem der Intentionalität – Naturalistische Lösung oder meßtheoretische Auflösung?* *Ethik und Sozialwissenschaften* 3 (1992) S.433f., s. also my criticism on p.497ff.

would like to apply the epigraph of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* taken from a play of Nestroy to the achievements of the followers of the later Moore, of the later Wittgenstein and of Carnap: that progress has a tendency to appear greater than it really is.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> In Tegtmeier 1998 I tried to show that Quine and Putnam with all their revolutionary appearance presuppose the orthodoxies of the Vienna Circle.