The Ineluctable Intentionality of Mental Phenomena

Luke Connolly

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.colgate.edu/car
Part of the Philosophy Commons, and the Psychology Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://commons.colgate.edu/car/vol4/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at Digital Commons @ Colgate. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colgate Academic Review by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colgate. For more information, please contact skeen@colgate.edu.
Franz Brentano, in attempting to distinguish between mental and physical phenomena, uses “presentation” to be the single defining characteristic of mental phenomena. Specifically, Brentano identifies the “acts of presentation” as necessarily mental phenomena, and in so doing identifies a structure in which the mental activity is always “intentional” insofar as it refers toward some object. Thus, for a given state to be considered mental, it must necessarily be considered an act of presentation and as directed towards some content. A large number of conscious states which appear to be obviously mental share this feature. Certain emotional states, however, seem to lack the same intentional structure, and reveal themselves as fault lines in this touchstone of mental phenomena. Beyond sealing these vulnerable surface fractures, it is also important to consider whether the overall method of developing the distinction between mental and physical phenomenon is apposite at all.

Some clarification is necessary in order to properly consider Brentano’s position. Most importantly, the concept of “object” must be clarified, since it is both so natural and inappropriate to equate it with the colloquial signification of the word. The object of a given intentional state is simply understood as that in which the state is fundamentally presented. Brentano argues that the objects of mental states are not necessarily external objects. Hope, which Brentano explicitly defines as a mental phenomenon, can have this type of internal intentional object. The expression of a hope for something is clearly intentional, while a general feeling of hopefulness may seem to lack a specific intentional object. In spite of this, if we accept Brentano’s concept of “presentation” it is clear that hope does indeed have intentional structure. Put simply, the state which we claim to be in is the act of presentation itself. Indeed, for Brentano, the claim that hope is “present” to the subject at all reveals a commitment to the very same act of presentation necessary to identify it as a mental phenomenon. To declare something as present to a subject, even if it is considered to be fused with or contained in the subject, is to claim that which Brentano calls its “mental inexistence.”[^1] Thus, just as the hopeful subject is said to have hope, the subject’s hopefulness is precisely a presentation of that hope, and therefore demonstrates an intentional structure.

It may be easier to understand Brentano’s position if we abstract intentional relationships from other more obvious mental states. Consider, as Brentano does, the pleasure in the hearing of a harmonious sound. It is clear that this pleasure is intentionally

[^1]: Franz Brentano *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*. Oskar Kraus, ed. Routledge. op. cit. pg. 88
directed towards something, but it is less obvious what this object is. For Brentano, it is not the sound itself that is the object of this pleasure, but the act hearing the sound. This seems to make perfect sense, in that there is nothing pleasurable contained within the sound, but it is rather that the pleasure is intended towards the very hearing of the sound which we delight in. To expand upon Brentano’s example, consider two people enjoying the same chord. The chord itself can be said to be exactly identical for both subjects, except for minute differences caused by the position of the subject in relation to the source of the sound. The objects of each person’s pleasure, nonetheless, are completely distinct from each other in that they have their existence only in the act of presentation within the consciousness of the subject. In the interest of accuracy, one might say “I am pleased by hearing that chord” instead of “I am pleased by that chord,” even though it would be impossible to be pleased by the sound of a chord without hearing it.

Analogously, the word hope and all of its dictionary definitions can be understood as the musical chord itself, while the subject’s general feeling of hope, however abstract and seemingly undirected, is in fact another presentation and therefore the object of their hoping. Here it is important to note once again that “presentation” is understood as the “act of presentation.” Therefore in feeling of a most general kind of hope, the intentional object is the presentation of hope itself. As Brentano suggests, such an object is necessary to speak meaningfully about a “subject” whatsoever. Consider, for example, a person observing a painting in a museum. If there is no painting to speak of, the concept of a subject as the person viewing the painting loses its content. Assuming all mental phenomena are the phenomena of a conscious subject, it is therefore a necessary condition to have some intentional object in order for any state to be considered mental.

If we want to adopt this system for distinguishing mental from physical phenomena, we must entertain the idea that we are simply projecting this intentional structure onto something which does not necessarily possess such a structure. Perhaps if we take a truly empirical standpoint we will find that there is nothing in the feeling of an emotion which has something as its object, and that intentionality is entirely inappropriate for identifying this type of phenomena. In order to dispel this concern, it is important to understand the way in which the structure was originally discovered.

Much in the way that scientific theories are developed from observed phenomena, intentionality has at its foundation the very phenomena of what we normally consider to be mental or conscious. Imagine, for example, a blue square. In this very act of imagination, we are positing the existence of some blue square which we have imagined; a blue square is conceived and beheld entirely within consciousness. If we consider imagining a blue square while denying the existence of a mentally “inexistent” object, we are essentially considering the imagination of a non-

---

2 Franz Brentano. op. cit. pg. 90
Another way of justifying intentionality as a criterion for a phenomenon to be considered mental is by comparison with the theories of natural science. A strong example to consider is that of Bohr’s atomic model. Based upon what we now know regarding the electron “cloud” that surrounds the nucleus of an atom, Bohr’s diagram depicting electrons with circular orbits is overly simple and now functionally obsolete. While all of these models are simply systems created by scientists to explain certain physical phenomenon, it is this very process of hypothesis and re-evaluation that makes the system functionally tenable. For example, adjusting the diagram to include the unpredictability of individual electrons does not falsify the theory, but rather simply adds a level of nuance which allows the model to more accurately depict the observed phenomena.

This is precisely what Brentano has done with his model of intentionality. The predictable nucleus of his theory consists of the protons and neutrons of thoughts and the more obviously-intentional emotional states. Simply because the electrons of complicated emotions require a more nuanced understanding does not mean that the intentional structure fails to apply to them. If it could be proven that Brentano’s position is merely a system developed to describe the phenomena, its ability to do so accurately and predictably reveals the value in such a model.

The “intentional in-existence” of mental phenomena is something that Brentano claims is never present in
physical phenomena. This is essentially the argument that objects of mental phenomena are contained within the phenomena, while physical phenomena are directed towards an external object. Any state in which the intentional object can be said to be contained within the phenomenon of that state is therefore a mental state. In this conclusion we discover the true weight of Brentano’s position. It offers an explanation for why mental phenomena are private to each individual consciousness and prevents physical phenomena from becoming the mere illusions of idealism. For any state that is considered to be mental, we can discover an intentional structure and the “in-existence” of an object within the consciousness of the experiencing subject.

Brentano has developed a theory which fails only in its breadth. Until each state we deem to be mental is identified as intentionally structured, there will be questions as to whether it can be used to distinguish any member of the class of mental phenomena from those normally considered to be physical. Still, his position sheds light upon how the acts of consciousness are actually structured and offers a reliable means of distinguishing mental from physical acts without appealing to our preconceived notion of them. Until a strong example is provided of a mental phenomenon without intentional object or of a physical phenomenon in which the object is contained within the act itself, Brentano’s theory serves at the very least as a system of designation for the mental and the physical. Also, the manner in which he approaches the original problem, namely by starting with the empirical phenomena and moving towards the abstracted connection, is something worthy of attention. Future theories about the distinction between the mental and physical will need to display the same rigorous avoidance of a theory created independently from the experience of such phenomena, a fact which testifies to its value and significance. Whether it is accepted or rejected as a functional system, Brentano’s position cannot be ignored.

3 Franz Brentano. op. cit. pg. 89