

INTENTIONALITY AND THE EXTERNALISM VERSUS INTERNALISM DEBATE

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In their excellent book *The Phenomenological Mind* Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi demonstrate that analytic philosophy of mind and cognitive science have much to learn from work conducted in the phenomenological tradition. In particular, they show how discussions about embodied cognition, about the self, and about mind-reading could be greatly enhanced if the lessons of phenomenology were heeded to. However, their discussion of the structure of intentionality is, in my view, less successful in this regard.

In this brief commentary I wish to focus on this discussion and to highlight some difficulties for it. In particular, I shall argue that there are internal tensions in the general account of intentionality Gallagher and Zahavi present in the book. I also show that this account is not easily reconciled with their endorsement of an enactive account of perception. Finally, I raise some questions about their presentation of the issues in the debate between externalists and internalists about mental content.

Gallagher and Zahavi's discussion of intentionality begins with a brief presentation of Franz Brentano's account of the notion. This move is no surprise since it is precisely to Brentano that we owe the first modern significant discussion of this topic. Intentionality, he claimed, is the directness of mental states toward objects; it is their aboutness or of-ness. More precisely, Brentano wrote:

Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself, although they do not all do so in the same way. In presentation something is presented, in judgement something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired and so on. (Brentano quoted in Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p. 109)

Gallagher and Zahavi follow other critics in highlighting a difficulty in Brentano's position which is implicit in this quote. Brentano appears to believe that the intentional object of a mental state, which is the object toward which the state is directed, must be an object of a special kind that exists in the mind. Brentano, as it is well known, resorts to this move in order to explain how we can desire, believe or even

fear things that do not exist in the world. These states are common: many children believe in Santa Claus and fear monsters that are not really there.¹

Gallagher and Zahavi reject Brentano's move and turn instead to Husserl's account of intentionality which I take them to endorse.² Their discussion of Husserl, however, is almost entirely drawn from his *Logical Investigations*. The choice to ignore Husserl's more mature views as presented in the *Ideas* is most unusual. It is perhaps motivated by concerns with space or by the introductory nature of this volume. Be that as it may, the fundamental Husserlian notion of 'noema' which is crucial to his mature account of the structure of intentionality only appears in a lengthy footnote. Later in what follows, I shall introduce this notion to fill in what I take to be gaps in the presentation offered by Gallagher and Zahavi in this book.³

Contra Brentano, Gallagher and Zahavi assert that intentional objects are ordinary objects, and not objects of a special kind. They write:

The intentional object is not a special kind of object, but rather the answer to the question of what a certain intentional state is about. If the answer refers to some non-existing object, the intentional object doesn't exist. If the answer refers to some existent thing, then the intentional object is that real thing. So if I look at my fountain pen, then it is this real pen which is my intentional object, and not some mental picture, copy, or representation of the pen (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p. 114)

With these claims Gallagher and Zahavi clearly intend to distance themselves from any view that postulates the existence of sense data or of any other mental entity which would function as the intentional objects of mental states. As Gallagher and Zahavi acknowledge, they are indebted to Tim Crane for this way of phrasing the issue of the status of intentional objects (Crane 2001, p. 26). For this reason it is interesting to see where the two views differ.

For Crane the lesson of this point about the ontological status of intentional objects is that mental states are not always best understood in terms of relations between

¹ That these states are common is not as obvious as it might seem. Disjunctivists would dispute this description of what goes on in these cases. I discuss this issue below when I mention a disjunctivist account of perceptual hallucination.

² I draw this conclusion from the fact that they refer to it as the 'positive account'.

³ My presentation will be based on Zahavi (2004) which offers an extensive discussion of some topics discussed in this book and reaches similar conclusions.

thinkers and the intentional objects the mental states are about (Crane 2001, p. 23). Crane holds this view because he is committed to the claim that relations entail the existence of their relata (Crane 2001, pp. 23-24). Consequently, since it is possible to think about things that do not exist, having a thought about something at least sometimes is not a matter of being related to an intentional object. Instead, Crane claims mental states are relations between subjects and mental contents (Crane 2001, p. 32). These contents are the ways in which the intentional objects are presented to the subject (Crane 2001, p. 29). Thus, these modes of presentation can exist even though what they point toward fails to. These features of Crane's account of the structure of intentionality indicate that he subscribes to what Zahavi has called a triadic account (Crane 2004, p. 53).⁴ In his view, it is in virtue of the subject's relation to a mediating mental content that her intentional states are about their intentional objects.

In what follows I shall follow Zahavi in classifying theories of intentionality as either triadic or dyadic. However, it should be kept in mind that so-called triadic theories do not typically identify intentionality as a triadic relation at all. Instead, they take it to be a two-term relation between mental state and its content, which is typically thought of as the mode of presentation of the intentional object. This relation is supplemented in those instances in which the object exists by a further relation between the content and the intentional object. When I refer to triadic theories below, I mean theories which like Crane's have this structure.

Despite their reliance on Crane in the formulation of their view about the ontological status of intentional objects, Gallagher and Zahavi appear to disagree with Crane about whether mental states are to be thought of as relations to their intentional objects. Thus, they support the following thesis:

intentionality is not an ordinary relation to an extraordinary object, but a special kind of relation to an ordinary object; a special 'relation' that can hold, even if the object doesn't exist (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.113).

Unlike Crane, Gallagher and Zahavi claim that intentionality is a special relation because it can hold even when one of the relata does not exist. I am unsure about how to interpret this claim. It is certainly intended to convey the thought that the intentionality

⁴ Crane's full account is more complex than this since it involves more than three components.

of a mental state is not contingent on the existence of its intentional object. This thought is, on the face of it, opposed to disjunctivism, a view which treats intentionality as an ordinary relation to ordinary objects in the world. The disjunctivist account of the structure of intentionality is therefore dyadic since it does not postulate the existence of an intermediary whose role it is to secure reference to the intentional object.

For disjunctivists, mental states, typically perceptual states, are said to have object-dependent contents because these states do not exist unless their intentional objects also exist. Hence, for example, disjunctivists hold that there is no common perceptual state between a person who sees a rose and one who hallucinates an identical rose. The person who hallucinates does not have a hallucinatory experience but has a hallucination of an experience. In other words, the person who suffers from an hallucination does not have a perceptual state with a false content about a rose; instead they falsely believe that they have an experience, when they do not.⁵

The disjunctivist position thus denies the existence of the phenomenon that prompted Brentano to postulate that intentional objects have a mental existence, and Crane to claim that intentionality is a relation to contents rather than objects. Gallagher and Zahavi's commitment in their discussion of the structure of intentionality to claims which are incompatible with disjunctivism is, as I show below, in tension with their views about perception which are tantamount to supporting a version of disjunctivism.

I have claimed that I am unsure about how to interpret the quote from Gallagher and Zahavi that I have presented above. This is because in my view it cannot be read literally as saying that intentionality is a relation that can hold between two things even though (at least) one of them does not exist. If we adopted this reading we would be forced to conclude that there literally are things which do not exist. In other words, we would be forced to resort to the idea that there are two kinds of things: those which are but do not exist and those which are and exist. This is exactly Brentano's move when he postulated that intentional objects that do not exist in reality have a special kind of mental existence. It is clearly a move which Gallagher and Zahavi would not endorse since they are at pains to assert that intentional objects are not objects of a special kind. However, they cannot escape this deeply unpalatable conclusion if they adopt a literal interpretation of their claim about the sort of relation intentionality is, since in order to

⁵ Incidentally, this shows why disjunctivism is more plausible when restricted to perceptual states.

characterise any relation we must specify what its relata are. But now we are immediately committed to the claim that there are things, which do not exist.

It is, thus, perhaps best, therefore, not to interpret the quotation literally. If so we must read it as making two claims. The first is that intentional objects are ordinary objects, and not objects of a special kind. The second is that intentional states can exist even though their intentional objects do not. But if this is what the claim means we are left with these two conclusions neither of which sits well with other claims made by Gallagher and Zahavi in this chapter. The first is that disjunctivism is false, since it entails that the existence of a mental state necessitates the existence of its intentional object. The second is that Crane is right to claim that not all mental states are relations to their intentional objects. Nevertheless, I resort to this interpretation of their views because their commitment to the claim that intentional objects are ordinary objects is stronger than their commitment to the claim that intentionality is a special kind of relation between things some of which might not exist, and the two commitments are in my view, incompatible.

This interpretation is also justified by the fact that similar adjustments need to be made to another claim Gallagher and Zahavi make about the nature of the relation between acts of consciousness (which they appear to identify with intentional acts or mental states) and objects of consciousness (which they take to be intentional objects). Gallagher and Zahavi claim that this relation is internal in the sense that “one can identify each item in the relation only by reference to the other item to which it is related” (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p. 113). Since this relation is said to hold between the mental state and the intentional object, I take it to be the intentionality relation.

This reading, however, immediately leads us into multiple problems. Firstly, intentional objects are ordinary objects and as such they transcend the existence of any ordinary mind. Even if one were to subscribe to Kantianism and think of ordinary objects as objects of possible experiences, it is certainly not true that it is not possible to identify the apple I had for breakfast independently of my visual perception of it. Ordinary objects are public at least precisely in the sense that they can be identified independently of any mental state directed toward it (although maybe they are not independent of all actual and possible mental states). Secondly, an internal relation is one that holds only if the relata exist. Internal relations, as Gallagher and Zahavi define

them, are not contingent, they are necessary. They make reference to one term necessary for the identification of the other. It follows that when two terms are internally related it is not possible for one to exist without the other. Yet, this is precisely what Gallagher and Zahavi have denied holds of intentional relations.

All of these difficulties could disappear if one were to invoke some sort of internalist notion of mental content. One could then with Crane hold both that the existence of a contentful mental state is not contingent on the existence of its intentional object and claim that a mental state is defined by a relation to its intentional content which is the way in which the intentional object is presented to the subject (Crane 2001, p. 29). It is of the relation between the mental state and its content that it would be correct to say that it is not possible to specify the one without making reference to the other.

To summarise the argument so far, Gallagher and Zahavi appear to subscribe to three incompatible theses:

- A. Intentional objects are ordinary objects
- B. Intentionality is a dyadic relation between mental states and their intentional objects.
- C. The existence of a mental state is not contingent on the existence of its intentional object.

The three theses are incompatible because to take intentionality to be a dyadic relation between mental state and intentional object requires both relata to be (if not to exist in reality) in order for the relation to hold. Two options are available to subscribers of the view. They can deny that intentional objects are ordinary objects, and thus deny A. Alternatively, they might insist that A is true and commit themselves to the view that mental states are object dependent and thus deny C. The first option was taken by Brentano; the second by contemporary disjunctivists such as John McDowell (1998) or Alva Noë (forthcoming). Since I have taken Gallagher and Zahavi to be strongly and clearly committed to both A and C, I have resorted to suggesting that they might with Crane, to whom they are clearly indebted in their discussion, deny B and take intentionality to be a relation between mental states and their contents which holds even when the intentional object does not exist.

I am confident, however, that Gallagher and Zahavi would reject this reconstruction of their view. I base this confidence on two facts: their endorsement of enactivism about perception in chapter 5 and my acquaintance with an earlier essay by Zahavi on Husserl's theory of intentionality and on the internalism/ externalism debate in analytic philosophy of mind (Zahavi 2004). However, before considering these two points a few words about the connections between the view about intentionality I have sketched above and both internalism and externalism about mental contents might be in order to avoid any possible confusions. The characterisation of intentionality as a dyadic or triadic relation is orthogonal to issue of internalism versus externalism. In a nutshell, for an internalist the individuation of mental contents is exclusively dependent on factors which are internal to the bearer of those states (i.e., the thinker).⁶ On the contrary, for an externalist the individuation of mental contents is not exclusively dependent on such factors. It should be apparent then that it is possible to be an internalist and think that intentionality is a dyadic relation. This is Brentano's position. It is also possible to think that intentionality is a triadic relation, and be an internalist about mental content. This is the view defended by Crane (2001, p. 117). Similarly, one can be an externalist and hold that intentionality is a dyadic relation. This is the view defended by Noë, and other disjunctivists. Alternatively, one can subscribe to externalism and take intentionality to be a triadic relation. This is the position of prominent representationalists like Fred Dretske (1995) or Michael Tye (1995).

Gallagher's and Zahavi's discussion would in my opinion have benefited from being clearer on these issues and especially on the similarities and differences between disjunctivism and other forms of externalism. If they had done so, they might have been less inclined to claim as they do that phenomenology puts into question the very distinction between internalism and externalism about content (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p. 124). They might also have clarified how their support for Noë's enactivist view of perception as active exploration of the environment can be reconciled with their views on intentionality (cf. Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p. 99). Noë endorses

⁶ The notion of 'internal' that is at issue here is not without its ambiguities. It might mean a feature of the subject that the subject has independently of anything else, or it could mean a feature of the subject that she shares with all her doppelgangers. These two characterisations are not equivalent but it is beyond the scope of this short commentary to enter into the details here.

disjunctivism, and yet this is precisely the position that is contradicted by several claims made by Gallagher and Zahavi in their discussion of intentionality in this book.

In order to clarify my contentions, I shall return to Zahavi's earlier piece and to the reasons why I am confident Gallagher and Zahavi would reject the interpretation I have forced upon them above. In that article Zahavi is concerned with the account of intentionality Husserl develops in the *Ideas*. He presents two different kinds of interpretation of Husserl's position. The so-called 'West Coast' interpretation championed by Hubert Dreyfus attributes to Husserl an account of intentionality as a triadic relation that holds between mental state, a noema understood as a mode of presentation, and an intentional object (cf. Zahavi 2004, p. 48). According to this view, the existence of the mental state is not dependent on the existence of its intentional object. Opposed to this view stand various 'East Coast' interpretations that take intentionality to be a dyadic relation and identify the noema with (part of) the intentional object in the external world. The intentional object, however, is not conceived as devoid of significance. Instead, the ordinary object itself is conceived as imbued with meaning (cf. Zahavi 2004, pp. 48, 50).

It is this second interpretation that is endorsed by Zahavi in this article, and it is for this reason that I am convinced they would reject the reconstruction I proposed above which attributed to him and Gallagher a triadic interpretation of the intentionality relation. Another reason why they might resist the interpretation is that it stands opposed to the kind of disjunctivism entailed by Noë's enactive account of perception; a view to which Gallagher and Zahavi are sympathetic in chapter 5 of this book.

Given that the interpretation I offered above is to be rejected, what are we to make of the incompatible triad of claims Gallagher and Zahavi appear to accept? Although, they do not do so in this book, I would propose that they reject thesis C, and embrace disjunctivism. Zahavi already hints in that direction himself when he discusses what 'East Coast' Husserlians should say about hallucinations (Zahavi 2004, p. 54). Thus I conclude that the claim that intentionality is an extraordinary relation is best abandoned by Gallagher and Zahavi if they wish to keep most of their theory intact.

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