

# Intentional Relations

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## *Abstract*

Thinking about Obama and thinking about Pegasus seem to be the same kind of thing: both are cases of thinking about something. But they also seem to be different kinds of thing, in that one is relational and the other not. This paper aims to show a way out of the impasse by distinguishing varieties of relationality, concluding that what matters is the two-term relational nature of all intentional states, regardless of whether or not the representations they involve have referents.

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## 1. A Problem About Relationality

In some intentional states, the mind is related to the world. When I think about Obama, I stand in a relation to him: the state I am in could not exist unless he exists. In other intentional states, this straightforward relationality is absent, for two familiar reasons: (a) my intentional state is directed at something that does not exist and (b) my intentional state is nonspecific. When I think about Pegasus, reason (a) says that I cannot be in a relational state: I am in a state that obtains even though Pegasus does not exist. When John wants a sloop, reason (b) says that he may fail to be in a relational state: although plenty of sloops exist, John may not have fixed his desire on any one of them. We are faced with a paradox: some intentional states are relational and some are not. But all intentional states are the same kind of thing, and things of the same kind are either all relational or all non-relational.<sup>1</sup> The aim of this paper is to show a way out of this seeming impasse.

I will take for granted that intentional states involve relations to mental representations.<sup>2</sup> We can divide such *states* according to the kind of representation

<sup>1</sup> Compare Prior (1971: 130): “(a) X’s thinking of Y constitutes a relation between X and Y when Y exists, but (b) not when Y doesn’t; but (c) X’s thinking of Y is the same sort of thing whether Y exists or not. Something plainly has to be given up here; what will it be?”

<sup>2</sup> Fodor says “I seem to have grown old writing books defending RTMs [representational theories of mind]” (Fodor 1998: 1). The book from which this quotation is drawn (*Concepts*) is a good introduction. Other notable proponents of representational theories of mind include Dretske 1995, Lycan 1996, Harman 1973, Field 1978, Sterelny 1990.

involved, for example distinguishing intentional states in which the subject is related to a truth-evaluable conceptual representation, which I call a thought, from intentional states in which a subject is related to a conceptual representation which is not truth-evaluable. Intentional states in the first category are commonly called “propositional attitudes”. Those in the second category, if indeed there are any, are sometimes called “objectual attitudes”. To avoid potentially misleading associations of this terminology, I shall refer to the first category of intentional states as those involving thoughts, and the second category as those not involving thoughts. Intentional states that do not involve thoughts typically involve concepts, and concepts are mental representations which, when suitably combined, make up thoughts. All intentional states involve concepts, but some may involve a concept or conceptual structure which is not evaluable for truth, and so is not a thought. If you are asked to think of a number, it might be that the number nine comes to mind, and on one view there is nothing more to your intentional state, so far as its representation is concerned, than your exercise of the concept NINE. This concept is not evaluable as true or false, so this is a potential example of an intentional state not involving a thought.

We can divide *attributions* of intentional states into two kinds, often called clausal and non-clausal. A paradigm of a clausal, or as I shall say sentential, attribution consists of an intensional verb like “believes”, followed by an optional “that”, followed by a complete sentence. A paradigm of a non-clausal, or as I will say nonsentential, attribution consists of an “intensional transitive verb”, followed by a noun phrase, as in “Raoul is thinking about Obama”.<sup>3</sup>

The following pairing may seem natural, but I will avoid commitment to it: sentential attributions are made true by intentional states involving thoughts, and non-sentential attributions are made true by intentional states not involving thoughts. The reason not to take this pairing for granted is, as hinted earlier, that there is room for doubt whether there are any intentional states not involving thoughts. The skepticism might be grounded in two ways. (i) Perhaps non-sentential attributions are reducible in every case to sentential attributions. Since sentential attributions require as truth-makers intentional states involving thoughts, all truth-making intentional states involve thoughts. So there are no intentional states not involving thoughts (or at least none that we can ascribe). (ii) Just as Frege said that only in the context of a sentence does a word have meaning, so one might think that only in the context of a thought can a concept be exercised. This means that in every intentional state involving the exercise of concepts, a thought is involved. This metaphysical claim does not involve commitment to the semantic reducibility envisaged in (i).

Although there may be cases in which nonsentential attributions are equivalent to sentential ones, I reject the full generality claimed by (i) (along with Montague 2009, Forbes 2017 and many others). Rejecting (i) does not exclude the possibility that (ii) is correct, and I leave that possibility open. This disrupts the tidy association between, on the one hand, thought-involving intentional states and sentential attributions and, on the other, non-thought-involving intentional states and nonsentential attributions. If (ii) is true, the truth-makers for nonsentential attributions are thought-involving intentional states.

<sup>3</sup> Here I take for granted, for terminological convenience, that an expression of the form “that p” is not a noun phrase.

Given the rejection of (i), the semantics for nonsentential attributions is not going to be the same as for sentential attributions, and the question asked in the opening paragraph stands: do nonsentential attributions attribute relational states or not? We incline to an affirmative answer when we consider Raoul's thinking about Obama and a negative one when we consider his thinking about Pegasus.<sup>4</sup> Yet intuitively all intentional states are of a single kind, as Prior stressed.

Much of the history of discussions of intentionality could be described as attempts to come to terms with these seemingly conflicting features. I start by considering two ways in which one might attempt to reveal all intentional states as relational. According to one, every intentional state involves a relation to a mental object: an idea, a sense datum, an intentional inexistent (Brentano 1874/2009: 68), or whatever; this is discussed in §2. According to the other, discussed in §3, we can achieve uniform relationality in another way, by allowing our ontology to include nonexistent objects.

## 2. Mental Objects

Intentional states do indeed have a kind of uniform relationality: according to representational theories of mind, they all involve a relation between a subject and a representation. This is a feature of the metaphysical nature of intentional states. But attitude attributions do not report these relations, even if the relations must obtain for the attributions to be true. When we report Raoul's state as his thinking about Obama, we do not refer to the concept OBAMA. We exercise the concept without referring to it, just as we may use the word "Obama" without referring to the word. Likewise, although Raoul himself may exercise the concept OBAMA, he is not thinking about that concept; rather, he is thinking about Obama, a very different kind of thing. Representations are not normally what our intentional states are *about* (your current intentional state is unusual), even if every intentional state involves the exercise of a representation.

Truth-makers for attitude attributions are relational in a way that the attributions themselves are not. This is not special to attitude attributions. We find the same structure in, for example, the attribution of weights. A truth-maker will involve the local gravitational forces, but these are not normally mentioned in an attribution. My cat weighs 10 lbs. This is made true by facts about how far she would depress a certain kind of balance in my local gravitational field. She would not depress it so far on the moon where the gravitational forces are different. But the attribution does not refer to gravitational forces. Likewise the attribution "Raoul is thinking about Obama" does not say that Raoul is exercising the concept OBAMA, even though his doing so is typically<sup>5</sup> what makes the attribution true. Because the term of the relation is not made explicit in the attribution of thinking (or of weight), I call the relevant relationality "covert".

Although this position is a straightforward consequence of a representational theory of mind, it risks being misunderstood, and it also does not provide a full

<sup>4</sup> The same questions arise, although somewhat less directly, for sentential attributions. "Raoul thinks that Obama is president" seems to ensure that Raoul is related to Obama, but we cannot make an analogous claim concerning "Raoul thinks that Pegasus flies". I will discuss the issue only for nonsentential attributions.

<sup>5</sup> But not always. In an attribution, we can sometimes use a concept not used by the subject in order to report the subject's state. The constraints on these permitted divergences are varied: see Sainsbury 2017.

resolution of our initial problem. It risks being mistaken for the incorrect view that intentional states are *about* representations;<sup>6</sup> and it fails to address the intuition that thinking about Obama is relational in a way that thinking about Pegasus is not (see §5).

Hume said that “the slightest philosophy” teaches us that “nothing can ever be present to the mind but an image or perception” (*Enquiry* 12.9). This means that trees and apples cannot be present to the mind. Given his Copy Principle, the view made it difficult for him to explain how we could so much as have an idea of external and continued existences (a problem he grappled with rather heroically in *Treatise* 1.4.2). This exemplifies a disastrous turn that a representationalist view may take: instead of saying that the intentional states are about what their representations are about, the fatal temptation for British Empiricist thinkers (and others) is to regard the intentional states as about the representations (“ideas”) themselves.

The same turn is found in other contexts. It is fairly widely agreed that for any veridical sensory experience it is possible for there to be a non-veridical one that is indistinguishable to the subject. Hence a veridical and an indistinguishable non-veridical experience have something in common. A representationalist might express the commonality by saying that the cases involve two token representations of the same narrowest qualitative type. There would be no harm in calling these representations “sense data”, except that “sense data theorists” wish to say that sense data are the *objects* of experience: are what is seen or smelled. But representations cannot be seen or smelled. They neither react appropriately with light nor emit odiferous molecules. For representationalists, all intentional states, including perceptual states, are relational, but the representations are not the “objects” of the states in the sense of what the states are about. Rather, the representations are what bring represented objects “before the mind”. Analogously, we see by using our eyes, but we do not see our eyes. Using our eyes does not make our vision indirect.

Here are two recent examples of the erroneous view that, for representationalists, representations are the objects of intentional states. Prior describes a view he will reject in these terms: “in thinking of anything at all, we thereby put ourselves into a relation, not with *that thing*, but only with an idea or what-have-you which in favorable cases may ‘represent’ a real thing but in unfavorable cases does not” (Prior 1971: 127). If one omitted the phrase “not with *that thing*, but only”, this would be a rough description of the view I defend. But the needless additions show that Prior is determined to turn it into the erroneous view, which he rightly goes on to reject.

Mark Richard (2001: 104) describes hunting and other intentional states like this: “When I hunt, expect, worship, fear, or loathe, I am focused on some representation of mine that is ‘the object of my activity’”. A representation is centrally present in the mind of a hunter, but the hunter’s focus is not on the representation. Rather, through the representation, the subject focuses on what he is hunting, expecting, or worshipping. Hunting a lion involves representing a lion, but what

<sup>6</sup> Similarly for thought-involving intentional states and their sentential attributions: the states are not about the thoughts, but are about what the thoughts are about; and a sentential attribution does not refer to the thought in the subject’s state and say that the subject is related to it.

is hunted is a lion. A lion, and not a representation, is “the object of my activity” if anything is.

### 3. Nonexistent Objects, and the Problem of Non-Objects

According to views commonly labeled Meinongian, there are nonexistent objects. It might seem that these would permit a uniform account of intentional states: the states are always relational, though in some cases the second relatum is nonexistent.

Meinongian views have been criticized for ontological extravagance, for creating “ontological slums”, for flying in the face of a sober sense of reality, and so on. It is hard to take these criticisms very seriously, unless they are coupled with something more substantive. If Meinongianism can provide a smooth and consistent account of intentionality, should we not regard that as a significant virtue, to be weighed against these alleged metaphysical “costs”?<sup>7</sup>

There is a less familiar problem. Some nonsentential attributions have complements that seem not to refer to objects of any sort, existent or nonexistent, for example:

1. Jane wants *more cookies*.
2. Tom simply wants *out*.
3. Felicity feared *something worse than mere words*.
4. Julie thought about *getting David to dance*.
5. Walter is worried about *what to do about the mortgage*.
6. Bill wondered *how to tie his bow tie*.
7. Harriet was afraid of *what Jules might do next*.
8. Lois liked *how Superman flew*.

The italicized phrases answer the question what the attributed states are about. In this sense, they specify the “objects” of the states. But it may seem hard to take these seriously as entities, existent or nonexistent; and so hard to take them seriously as objects, in the ordinary sense of this word. If we do not take them seriously as genuine objects, there is a wide range of nonsentential attributions which cannot be shown to be relational by appealing to non-existent objects as relata.

The problem could be labeled the “problem of non-objects”; or, to rework a phrase from Meinong (1904: 83), the problem of objects (“intentional objects”) that are not objects (in the ordinary sense, i.e. entities). The problem could be overcome in one of two ways: (i) by showing that the italicized phrases do refer to entities (possibly nonexistent), though perhaps of unfamiliar ontological categories; (ii) by showing that the attributions are really sentential at the level of logical form, and so create no more of a problem than do sentential attributions in general. The approaches are consistent, and one may be appropriate for some cases, the other for others. I will use “Meinongianism” for the view that nonsentential attributions are uniformly relational. (This is historically a bit misleading:

<sup>7</sup> Meinongianism must of course resolve its internal problems. Russell accused Meinong of being committed, incoherently, to the existence of the existent round square. Meinong attributes his own response to his student Mally. See Jacquette 1996: 16. It involves a distinction between “nuclear” and “extranuclear” properties, subsequently refined by, for example, Parsons. See Parsons 1978. The distinction has prompted disagreements. It is not needed in Priest’s version of Meinongianism, though Priest’s commitment to open and impossible worlds and to paraconsistent logic may be offputting to some. See Priest 2005.

a true follower of Meinong should keep to strategy (i), the objects to include “objectives” or propositions.) It will recognize nonexistent objects among the relata, and also whatever objects need to be found in order to address the problem of non-objects.

Approach (ii) seems appropriate for examples (1) and (2). Wanting more cookies might be held to amount to wanting to have more cookies, so that (1) “really” has a fully sentential complement: Jane wants it to be the case that *she has more cookies*. Likewise (2) might be taken to be equivalent to: Tom simply wants it to be the case that *he is out*.

Approach (i) seems appropriate for examples (3) and (4). “Something worse than mere words” might be held to denote a type of event, a potential object of fear.<sup>8</sup> (4) is arguably equivalent to: Julie thought about the action-type *getting David to dance*.

The complements in (5) and (6) are naturally understood as introducing indirect questions. While some approaches to questions do not readily extend to indirect questions in intensional contexts (see Karttunen 1977), a quick fix is tempting. A question was churning in Walter’s mind: what shall I do about the mortgage? So it is tempting to regard (5) as equivalent to:

9. Walter worried about *the question* what to do about the mortgage.

The existence of the relevant question is ensured by the final phrase of the attribution, which actually presents it (in grammatically indirect form). Applying the idea to (6) requires a slight modification, since questions cannot be wondered:

10. Bill wondered about *the question* how to tie his bow tie.

Questions, it may be claimed, are genuine entities, and are the referents of the noun phrase complements in (9) and (10). Any meaningful interrogative sentence expresses a question, so we could model questions as classes of semantically equivalent interrogative sentences. Questions come into existence when they are asked or considered; perhaps once they exist they are eternal. These metaphysics do not seem any weirder than the metaphysics of contracts or surveys. So this type-(i) approach seems promising with respect to (5) and (6).

Not all “wh”-clauses introduce indirect questions, and the envisaged proposal does not apply to those that do not. Superficially similar relative clauses require a different treatment, as in (7) and (8) above, repeated here:

7. Harriet was afraid of what Jules might do next.

8. Lois liked how Superman flew.

Harriet was not afraid of a question, and Lois did not like a question, but that should not be surprising: (7) and (8) use the “what” and the “how” to form genuine noun phrases, rather than indirect questions. “What Jules might do next” refers to the action-type, *Jules’s next action*. “How Superman flew” refers to *a way of flying*, a property of Superman’s flying. So if we are fairly relaxed about what is to count as an object, happy to include properties, questions, action-types, event-types and so on, it looks as if apparent non-object complements can be shown either to involve reference to an object, or else to be in reality sentential complements, just as the Meinongian hoped.

<sup>8</sup> More exactly, the best candidate would be a type of event-types, those that are worse than types consisting of mere words.

Although the examples make the Meinongian strategy seem promising, we should be cautious. Consider Sean, who is worried about how his performance will go. We can express his worry in terms of a question: he is asking himself “How will my performance go?”. It does not follow that he is worried about a question. We can imagine him responding: “It’s not the question that worries me, it’s my performance”. But we cannot interpret his state as simply a worry about his performance. He might have a worry about his performance by being worried whether he will be permitted to perform, while being confident about how his performance will go if he is permitted. The “how” must be part of the story. We cannot model this “how” in terms of properties of the performance, for it may be that no such property is before Sean’s mind. Part of his worry is precisely that he does not know what these properties will be, that is, he does not know how he will perform.

The issue is analogous to one that affects the view that all sentential complements refer to propositions. A standard problem is that fearing that the world will end is very different from fearing the proposition that the world will end (a fear that, as Graeme Forbes nicely puts it, affects only the “unduly timorous”). Likewise, worrying about how his performance will go is different from worrying either about the performance or about the question how it will go.

With this in mind, we might revert to Walter’s worry about the mortgage. He might object: “it’s not a *question* I’m worried about—it’s my *mortgage*”. We can hear words like “question” as referring to interrogative sentences or speech acts. Thus understood, questions are ordinary objects, but on this understanding Walter is right to say that it is not a question he is worried about. His worry is about *what to do*. It may take the form of Walter asking himself the question “What shall I do?”, but this question, considered as a sentence or speech act, is not what worries him. Although we can loosely use the word “question” to introduce what Walter was worried about, reflection suggests that, to the extent that a question is straightforwardly an object, a question is not really what he is worried about. Something similar applies to Bill’s bow tie. In the most ordinary sense of “question”, it is not a question that Bill wonders about, it is how to tie his bow tie. We have not entirely disposed of the problem of non-objects.

This is not a knock-down argument that the Meinongian cannot deal with the problem of non-objects, but it injects a note of caution. Moreover, and setting aside generalized hostility to nonexistents, Meinongianism is vulnerable to two methodological issues. One concerns the notion of logical form invoked in the transformation of a nonsentential attribution into a sentential one. The other concerns the considerable tolerance displayed in the notion of an object.

Two sentences may be logically equivalent yet differ in their logical form (e.g. “p” and “p or p”). If “being the logical form of” is to be a relation of use to semantics, a sentence’s logical form needs to reveal its semantic mechanisms. It is not easy to say what further constraints this imposes beyond identity of truth conditions. If semantics are to reflect the psychological reality of interpretation, then the theorist needs to state some general principles for transforming an arbitrary sentence into its logical form, principles which give insight into the processing procedures interpreters actually adopt.<sup>9</sup> The upshot in the present context is that logical form is not lightly to be invoked, and any use made of this notion

<sup>9</sup> DRT theorists are explicit that what I have called general principles should be algorithms. See Kamp et al 2011.

needs to be backed up with some indication of the relevant general principles. The Meinongian's attempt to treat some seemingly nonsentential attributions as "really" sentential is much more demanding than merely finding truth-conditional equivalents.

The other general issue is the capacious notion of an object required by Meinongianism. If one makes no distinction between "thing" and "object", the initial puzzle will lack bite. Raoul thinks about *something* whether he thinks about Obama or about Pegasus, and worries about *something* whether he worries about the mortgage or about Pegasus. If somethings are things, then every case involves a relation to a thing, and nonsentential attributions are readily seen to belong to a common "something"-attributing kind. But this is unsatisfying: there still seems to be a significant difference between the Pegasus case and the Obama case, which we cannot readily express if we make "object" as embracing as "thing". We need to find a criterion of objecthood that will ensure that not all things are objects. This raises another challenge, to be addressed by substantive metaphysical considerations.

The considerable differences among the objects invoked by Meinongianism raise other concerns. Thinking about Obama is the same in one way as thinking about Pegasus, for, in Meinongian perspective, both are thoughts about objects. But it is different in another way, since one is a thought about an existent and the other a nonexistent object. Even if both are genuine objects, the difference is considerable: thinking about an existent object might be based on causal relations, but nonexistent objects are causally inert, so what underlies thinking about one of these must be radically different. Likewise, thinking about a question seems pretty different from thinking about a person, even if a suitable notion of *question* can be excogitated. The global uniformity may obscure differences that need to be recognized.

Finally, Meinongian theories have nothing to say about the non-relationality induced by nonspecificity, as Priest has pointed out (Priest 2005: 64). Even if we could explain a desire for eternal life in terms of a relation to a nonexistent, namely eternal life, that explanation does not work for a nonspecific desire for a sloop. It is not that what the subject desires is nonexistent (there exist plenty of sloops), but simply that there is no specific object he desires. One might attempt to invoke another unfamiliar object, the "existentially generic sloop" (as in Lewis 1970/1983: 218). But it is clear that one who nonspecifically desires a sloop does not desire any such object. Nonspecificity means that Meinongianism as such will not deliver the uniform account of intentionality we envisaged. True, it counts *more* nonsentential attributions as attributing relational states than do many other accounts, but it does not supply the resources to justify claiming that *all* nonsentential attributions are relational.

These considerations suggest that it is worth exploring alternatives to the Meinongian position concerning the apparent non-uniformity of relationality in nonsentential attributions. I shall consider different kinds of relationality: factual, semantic, phenomenal and metaphysical.

#### 4. Factual Relationality

A fact is  $n$ -place relational just if it involves  $n$  terms. The word "relational" is often used for facts involving 2 or more terms, and one-term facts are simply called non-relational.



The fact that John lives in Texas involves more than one term: John and Texas. The fact that Harry lives in London and Berlin involves three terms, Harry, London and Berlin. The fact that the twins live in Bombay and Calcutta involves four terms, the twins (2), Bombay, and Calcutta. We have facts about living involving different numbers of terms: 2, 3 and 4. As I shall say, we have different degrees of factual relationality.

These different degrees intuitively do not show that the facts are of fundamentally different kinds in the three examples. Intuitively, living is the same kind of thing whether you do it in two places or one, or whether or not another person does it too. We can apply the moral to thinking. Raoul's thinking about Obama and his thinking about Pegasus differ in their factual relationality, the former being factually 2-term and the latter factually 1-term, and no doubt this is what leads us to suppose there is some important difference in the two cases. But what the analogy with living shows is that differences of factual relationality do not run deep: they do not undermine our view that all cases of living are of fundamentally the same kind. Likewise, differences of factual relationality among cases of thinking should not undermine our view that they are all of fundamentally the same kind. Just as living is living, and so fundamentally the same kind of thing whether done in two places or one, so thinking is thinking in both the Obama case and the Pegasus case.

### 5. Semantic Relationality

A fact is  $n$ -place semantically relational iff it can be stated by a sentence dominated by an  $n$ -place verb, one that takes  $n$  noun phrases to make a sentence. "Runs" (nontransitive) is a 1-place verb: it takes one noun phrase to form a sentence, "Rupert runs". "Kisses" is 2-place. A hypothesis is that semantic relationality can be more significant than factual relationality. What makes living "the same sort of thing" whether you do it in one place or two is that the semantic degree of the verb "lives" is constant.

"Lives" is a one-place verb. There is no so-called phrasal verb "lives-in".<sup>10</sup> This is shown by the fact that it needs no "in" clause at all, as in:

11. John lives with his wife/within his means/for love/to ride.

"John lives in Texas" consists of the sentence "John lives" plus the adjunct "in Texas", a "prepositional phrase". The difference in factual relationality in the examples concerning John and Harry comes from what is in the adjuncts. "Lives" itself is one-place.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps semantic relationality can provide a more significant species of uniformity, one which trumps the non-uniformity of factual relationality. "Thinks" is a one-place verb, shown by the fact that it needs no "of" or "about" adjunct at all. A conspicuous example is Descartes' cogito, and here are some others:

<sup>10</sup> Compare the disparaging remarks about whether there are phrasal verbs in Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 274. However, "give in" is a good candidate for being a phrasal verb, as in "He was so insistent that eventually I had to give in". This is obviously very different from "lives in" as used in "John lives in Texas".

<sup>11</sup> The point depends only on the constancy of the degree of "lives", and so can be accepted even by those who believe that "lives" is 2-place.

12. She thinks in the bath/clearly and dispassionately/while running/positively/too much for her own good.

If there is an “about” phrase, there is no restriction on how many terms it can introduce (from zero on up). As far as semantic relationality goes, thinking about Pegasus, about Obama, or about Russell and Whitehead are all of the same kind. The cases differ in their factual relationality, being respectively 1-term, 2-term and 3-term, but these differences are adventitious relative to the nature of thought. This uniformity in semantic relationality between thinking about Obama and thinking about Pegasus arguably justifies treating both as of the same kind.

Although semantic relationality is a genuine phenomenon, it is not one that can play the kind of taxonomic role just envisaged. “John lives in Texas” is equivalent to “John inhabits Texas”, but the verbs are of different degrees, “inhabits” being at least two-place. This delivers a difference in semantic relationality, but clearly this is of no significance to the nature of living or inhabiting. Similarly, insisting on the one-place character of “thinks” makes it different from the genuinely two-place (“transitive”) intensional verbs like “admires”, “fears” and “wants”. Yet any discussion of intentional states and intensional language needs a taxonomy that groups together thinking, admiring, fearing, and wanting, at some significant level of generality, even if the verbs differ in their semantic degree.

## 6. Phenomenal Relationality

An intentional state is phenomenally  $n+1$ -term relational iff in being in the state, it is for the subject as if there are  $n$  things that are before her mind. This is an attempt to provide a notion of relationality “from the subject’s point of view”, in the tradition begun by Brentano. Even for one who knows that Pegasus does not exist, in thinking about Pegasus it is as if there were one thing before her mind, so her state is 2-term phenomenally relational. Thinking about Obama has the same degree of phenomenal relationality, thus securing the uniformity that our initial puzzle called for. If she thinks about a unicorn and a centaur, this counts as 3-term phenomenally relational, since for her it is as if there were two things before her mind. Phenomenal relationality is independent of belief. Even a subject who thought that there was in reality no such person as Obama counts as in a 2-term phenomenally relational state when she thinks about him.

The counting gets problematic in various cases, especially when plurals are involved. What degree of relationality is involved in thinking about unicorns? If we say “two” (the subject, and then unicorns counted as single object) it becomes plain that we are not really counting *objects* coming before the mind, but rather the representations exercised in the intentional state. The concept UNICORNS is just one concept, even if it supposedly represents more than one unicorn. If we are counting a plural there needs to be more than one. If we are counting concepts, then we get to 1, but concepts are not what are before the mind; rather, they are the enablers, not themselves objects of thought.

If we say that in thinking about unicorns the subject is in a state with an indefinite degree of relationality  $>2$ , we locate indefiniteness in the world, rather than just in language. The sentence “There are several dogs in the yard” is indefinite with respect to how many dogs are said to be in the yard. But the yard contains a definite number of dogs, from zero on up. The indefiniteness is confined to language. In trying to excogitate phenomenal relationality, we would have no

way of keeping the indefiniteness so confined. The only definite number of unicorns is zero, and if this is used in our counting, the degree of phenomenal relationality  $<2$ , which conflicts with the plural “unicorns”.

If I want a sloop, it may well be that it is not for me as if there were a sloop before my mind. That would be the specific case, and my desire might be nonspecific. Again the question of the degree of phenomenal relationality has no satisfactory answer.

Brentano said that “Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself” (1874/2009: 88). The best interpretation of the remark is that intentional mental phenomena involve a relation to a mental representation. The notion of phenomenal relationality might be a failed attempt to describe this essential notion.

## 7. Metaphysical Relationality

Factual relationality does not seem metaphysically deep. At the relevant level of generality, *living* in Texas is the same kind of thing as *living* in London and Berlin. Likewise, *thinking* about Russell and Whitehead seems to be the same kind of thing as *thinking* about Obama. The difference between one and two “objects of thought” is not specially significant. Analogously, the difference between zero (the Pegasus case) and one (the Obama case) should not be regarded as striking.

The zero case is special in a different way, because it draws attention to the question how a nonsentential attribution can be true if there is nothing to which the noun phrase in the complement refers. This question does not arise when we consider the difference between one “object” and two, but it may arise when we consider the difference between zero “objects” and one, and this may explain why this seems like a special case: it dramatically reveals a core feature of intensionality. One explanation of this feature can be given by treating the complement position of intensional verbs as “semi-quotational”: instead of the words being used in their normal committal way, they are put on display as a way of revealing features of the subject’s intentional states. The truth of an attribution requires, not that the noun phrase in the complement refer to the right object, but that it express the right concept, one that reveals the nature of the subject’s intentional state.<sup>12</sup> In a theory of this kind, there is nothing semantically problematic about the case in which the noun phrase fails to refer. The complements contribute to truth conditions in just the same way whether they refer or not.

Semantic relationality varies between semantically equivalent sentences (e.g. one constructed from the one-place “lives” and one constructed from the two-place “inhabits”) and also varies between intensional verbs (“thinks” is one-place, “fears”, “wants” and “admires” are two-place), whereas if our topic is intentionality we should keep these verbs in a single category. Phenomenal relationality seems unable to provide good answers about the degree of relationality in many cases.

<sup>12</sup> See the “display theory” first sketched by Sainsbury 2012, and Sainsbury and Tye 2013. A more developed version is by Sainsbury 2017. The idea goes back at least to Buridan (SDD 4.3.8-4): “*talia verba [viz. intensional verbs] faciunt terminos sequentes appellare suas rationes*” [make the terms that follow them invoke their meanings].

The one solid foundation is the two-place metaphysical relationality that is involved in all intentional states: a relation between a subject and a representation. Two things have led to confusion. One is the covert nature of this metaphysical fact. We do not *state* that this relation obtains when we make nonsentential attributions. Rather, the obtaining of some relation of that kind is what is needed to make the attribution true. The relationality is of a kind with the relationality of attributions of weight with respect to the local gravitational field.

The other source of confusion is, as already mentioned, between the representation and what the representation is about. Intentional states are not normally about the representations they exercise. The representation is not the state's "object", as that is often used. Rather, the state's object is whatever, if anything, the representation refers to, or is about. The notion of "aboutness" needed to make this true is itself intensional: a representation may be about Pegasus, and a thought about Pegasus involves a representation about him.

Metaphysical relationality is the fundamental feature of intentional states, the nature they all share. In the original puzzle, it was claimed that Raoul's thinking about Pegasus is not relational, since there is no such thing as Pegasus, whereas his thinking about Obama is relational, since there is such a thing as Obama. But in both cases the claims are made true by Raoul being in a two-place relational state, involving a Pegasus-representation in one case and an Obama-representation in the other. The metaphysical underpinning of thinking about Pegasus is just as relational as his thinking about Obama. For the Pegasus case, that is not because there really is such a nonexistent object as Pegasus, but because the truth-making state is a relational one, holding between Raoul and, in the typical case, the concept PEGASUS. For the Obama case, the state is relational in the relevant way not because there is such an object as Obama, but because the truth-making state is a relational one, holding between Raoul and, in the typical case, the concept OBAMA.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Many thanks to Alberto Voltolini for comments on an earlier draft.

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