

Introduction to *Consciousness and Content*; a book of essays by Brian Loar
Katalin Balog
(Philosophy of mind)

Brian came to Rutgers University in 1994 which was when I was just beginning work on my dissertation on the conceivability arguments against physicalism. Word among graduate students of Brian being a difficult, but exciting and deep philosopher preceded his arrival; and I soon discovered that all of this was true to a very high degree. It was around this time that his last, great papers on consciousness and phenomenal intentionality were taking shape. I was first reticent in my interactions with Brian, mostly due to the demanding nature of his writing and thought; but I soon found a most charming and welcoming mentor and friend in him. I learned from him a new way to look at a whole array of philosophical problems; it also seems to me I learned a new way to look at myself.

Brian was the kind of philosopher that always goes for the most fundamental, deepest issue. He rarely wrote papers on small, technical questions. His sweep was grand, his views connecting questions about the nature of phenomenality, intentionality, and the mind-world, and language-world interface, the nature of introspection and its relation to perception, skepticism and our access to the external world, reference, narrow content, physicalism, reduction, the relationship between the scientific and the lived world, between subjectivity and objectivity.

His major contributions in the philosophy of mind include his groundbreaking approach to the mind-body problem (in “Phenomenal States”, see Chapter 10 in this volume) which originated a research program called the “phenomenal concept strategy”¹; and his idea that the concept of reference is an essentially first person concept and that there is a kind of intentionality (subjective, or phenomenal intentionality) in addition to referential intentionality (see Chapters 8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 15 in this volume), themes taken up by various philosophers in the “phenomenal intentionality research program”.²

The central concern in Brian’s philosophy was how to understand subjectivity in a purely physical universe. Brian was committed to the reality and reliability of the

¹See, e.g., Perry (2001), Tye (2003), Carruthers (2004), Aydede and Güzeldere (2005), Hill and McLaughlin (1999), Papineau (2002, 2006), Balog (1999, 2012a, 2012b), and Block (2006), and David Chalmers (2003), Levin (2007)

²See, e.g., Horgan and Tienson (2002), Horgan, Tienson and Graham (2004), Siewert (1998), and Kriegel (2011, 2013).

subjective perspective; and he found that subjective phenomena like intentionality and consciousness are, in a certain sense, ineliminable and irreducible to objective ones. At the same time he believed that intentionality and consciousness are grounded in the physical. One of his great contributions was showing how to reconcile these two positions by being a *conceptual and explanatory* anti-reductionist about both consciousness and intentionality but a *metaphysical* reductionist nonetheless. He had a deep commitment to both physicalism and to the reality and significance of the subjective point of view.

In the following I provide some background and discuss the main topics of the papers included in this volume. I try to point out the many interconnections between them; I find that Brian's work in the philosophy of mind was remarkably synoptic. In these papers he proposed a compelling and unified account of subjectivity, consciousness, intentionality, and their place in the physical universe.

Chapter 10, "Phenomenal states" (1990, 1997). I will mostly go in chronological order charting the development of Brian's ideas in the philosophy of mind; but I start with this seminal paper which he first published in 1990 and then in a revised, second version in 1997, both because of its influence on subsequent discussions of the mind-body problem and because its central idea is illuminating when applied to one's reading of his prior and subsequent papers on intentionality.

In this paper Brian addresses anti-physicalist arguments proposed in the last few decades. Anti-physicalists argue (Kripke, 1972; Nagel, 1974; Jackson 1982, Chalmers, 1996, 2009, etc.) that there is an epistemic/conceptual/explanatory gap between phenomenal and physical descriptions of the world, and from that they deduce that phenomenal states and qualities can't be identical to physical states and properties. Brian agrees about the existence of these gaps but denies that the falsity of physicalism follows from it.

Physicalists have come up with various different strategies to counter these arguments.³ One of these, the "phenomenal concept strategy", is originated in Brian's (1990, 1997) paper. The main idea is that these conceptual, epistemic, and explanatory gaps can be explained by appeal to the nature of phenomenal *concepts* rather than the nature of non-physical phenomenal properties. Phenomenal concepts, on this proposal, involve unique cognitive mechanisms, but none that could not be fully physically implemented. Brian proposes that this approach can undermine a central assumption of the anti-physicalist arguments that he calls the *Semantic Premise*. He formulates the

³ E.g., eliminativism (Dennett 1991); analytic functionalism (Lewis 1966); analytic representationalism (Jackson 2003); the denial that the phenomenal case involves gaps that other special science cases don't (Block & Stalnaker 1999).

Semantic Premise thus: A statement of property identity that links conceptually independent concepts is true only if at least one concept picks out the property it refers to by connoting a contingent property of that property.

This premise – which fits bona fide a posteriori metaphysical necessities (like “Water=H₂O”) introduced by Kripke (1972), but not any putative phenomenal-physical identities – is the target of Brian’s ingenious move. According to Brian, phenomenal concepts are concepts that a person applies directly to her qualia. They are tokened when, for example, a person sips a red wine and notices first sensations of tanginess and then a sensation of sourness. Brian (Loar 1990, 1997) says that phenomenal concepts belong to a wide class of concepts he calls “recognitional concepts.” Recognitional concepts are those that enable their possessors to perceptually recognize instances of the concept under certain circumstances. Thus recognitional concepts are connected, via their inferential roles, with basic perceptual concepts, sensory inputs, images, etc. Brian says that recognitional concepts have the general structure “is of that kind” where the demonstrative purports to refer to a kind as exemplified through a perception or image of an instance of the concept. Here is an illustration. Jerry sees a platypus for the first time in the zoo, and forms the concept ANIMAL OF THAT KIND⁴, where the demonstrative is focused on its reference by his perception. Possessing this concept, he is able to recognize other instances.

Here is the key idea. Phenomenal concepts are a *special kind* of recognitional concept. Their basic application is to one’s own phenomenal states as they occur, e.g., ITCH AGAIN. Of course, we also apply phenomenal concepts in memory and in reasoning and to other people. Unlike other recognitional concepts, a phenomenal concept *does not* refer via a contingent mode of presentation. Instead, it is applied *directly* to an internal state. Brian suggests that a phenomenal concept has a mode of presentation that is essential to its referent. What this means is that when tokening a phenomenal concept, the reference is presented via a token of that very referent. The mode of presentation exemplifies the very property referred to. For example, when tokening PAIN, the mode of presentation is the very painfulness of the token of pain to which the concept is applied. Thus the mode of presentation of a phenomenal concept is essential to its referent.

If this is the case, we can see how the Semantic Premise might be false. If phenomenal concepts are direct recognitional concepts, they do not have contingent modes of presentation. Nor do their physical counterparts in any putative phenomenal-physical identity. But there is nothing in Brian’s account of direct recognitional phenomenal concepts that rules out that these concepts, as well as their referents, are, or are realized by, purely physical states. PAIN and C-FIBRE FIRING both can refer to the same physical state (pain) but this state is being presented once in the theoretical/descriptive

⁴ I will indicate concepts by capital letters.

mode (C-FBRE FIRING), and once directly, "quotationally" (PAIN). Thus we can see why the Semantic Premise, though initially plausible, need not be true, indeed, why is it false on an internally consistent, physicalist assumption. Moreover, his account shows why the conceptual, explanatory and epistemic gaps between the phenomenal and physical – far from being problematic for physicalism – are *to be expected*, given his account of phenomenal concepts.

Brian in this article shows a new way to be physicalist: fully realist about phenomenology and subjective experience, fully aware of the ineliminable significance and meaning that only the subjective perspective provides for human beings; yet also fully committed to physicalism and physics as the ultimate account of the fundamental ontology of the universe even as admitting the lack of explanatory reduction for phenomenal states.

Chapter 8, “Social Content and Psychological Content” (1988) is his influential opening salvo in a series of papers dealing primarily with the nature of intentionality and its relationship to phenomenality (chapters 8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 15 in this volume). Ever since Putnam’s (1975) and Burge’s (1979) seminal papers the idea that ordinary content is partly dependent on factors external to the “head” has gained significant traction. It has also seemed reasonable, however, that from the point of view of psychological explanation all that matters is how things are “in the head”. Some philosophers proposed that, even if ordinary content goes beyond what is in the head, what is in the head still determines *another kind* of content – so-called *narrow content*. In this paper (written at the same time or earlier than Chapter 9, “Subjective intentionality” despite the later publication date) Brian enters this debate by drawing a distinction between “social content” which is externally-socially determined and essentially tied to language and communication; and “psychological content” which is central for psychological explanation, is determined by how one privately conceives things and is narrow.

While it has been widely held that sameness of *de dicto* or oblique ascription of belief implies sameness of psychological content – i.e., sameness in “how one privately conceives of things” – Brian argues that psychological content is not in general identical with what is captured by oblique that-clauses, and that psychological content is not especially elusive for that. He employs Kripke’s (1979) Pierre example to show that sameness in social content (content expressed in oblique that clauses) doesn’t imply sameness in psychological content; and Burge’s (1979) arthritis and Putnam’s (1975) Twin Earth examples, as well as some variations on them, to show that difference in social content doesn’t imply a difference in psychological content. Psychological content, Brian claims, is tied to perceptual phenomenology and private conceptual role, so it is narrow.

The important point for Brian is that two thoughts that are identical in their truth-conditions but play a different role in psychological explanation do not just differ functionally; but also in their *content*. In other words, Brian proposes that what is in the head, and is thus involved in psychological explanation is itself a kind of (narrow) content which is different from ordinary content, and it has to do with how one conceives of the world. As he says, “it is difficult to see how one can consider how one oneself conceives things without that in some sense involving what one’s thoughts are “about”.” (p. 108). These ways of conceiving should be considered content by what he calls the *Principle of the Transparency of Content*: whatever *appears*, from an unconfused perspective, as content, *is* content.

He briefly mentions two objections to narrow content that he grapples with in subsequent papers as well. One is The Argument from That-clauses and it goes like this. There could be narrow content only if purely internal factors could determine truth-conditions; after all, any content must specify the ways the world must be for that conception to be accurate. Truth-conditions in turn can be captured by that-clauses; but that-clauses capturing the content of my thought that water is delicious and the parallel thought of my twin on Twin-Earth where the relevant liquid is not H₂O but XYZ express different truth-conditions even though they are internally exactly alike. It follows that, since purely internal factors do not determine truth conditions, they cannot determine genuine content either.

Though Brian agrees that there are no that-clauses that capture the “personal”, psychological truth-conditions of our thoughts – he takes Putnam and Burge to have shown that that-clauses are always sensitive to social and external factors – he offers, without fully endorsing, the idea that narrow content determines – not truth-conditions but – *realization conditions* that pick out worlds corresponding to one’s conception of things. These worlds are centered worlds; they correspond to how the thought conceives the world as being, *given the context specified at the center* (to take into account the indexical element of thought). He calls these context-indeterminate realization conditions; they are shared by intrinsic duplicates and are sensitive to Burgean, Putnamian, and Kripkean deviations between truth-conditional content and psychological content.⁵ I will take up discussing this proposal in my review of his next paper, “Subjective Intentionality”.

The other objection is that narrow content is unspecified; that proponents should supply a better explication of the notion. In this paper Brian seems to describe narrow content as a matter of conceptual role and perhaps perceptual phenomenology. He clarifies his concept of narrow content in his subsequent papers, especially in Chapter 14 and 15, as he keeps trying to home in on the idea of it.

⁵ The idea of realization conditions owes some similarity to Dennett’s discussion of notional worlds (1982).

Chapter 9, “Subjective Intentionality” (1987). In this rich, and complicated paper, Brian continues his defense of narrow content against various objections. In response to the Argument from That-clauses, (also familiar from his previous paper), he considers – and ultimately rejects – one proposal to specify narrow content on which narrow content is truth-conditional in some way other than ordinary content. The proposal is that narrow content is a mapping from contexts to broad contents.⁶ So, for example, if Oscar and Twin Oscar share the same narrow content associated with the concept WATER, it is in virtue of the fact that their internal states corresponding to the concept WATER would pick out the same referent in each different context (where these contexts are understood as the context that determines reference) – in spite of the fact that in their respective environments Oscar refers to water and Twin Oscar to XYZ. Brian rejects this account of narrow content on the grounds that the relevant function from context to broad content would be the same for the thought that gin is delicious and the thought that vodka is delicious; because this “function is determined in part by a subfunction that maps a context onto whatever liquid is at the origin of a certain kind of causal path leading to the thought” (p 95).

That concepts can be associated with mappings from contexts (centered worlds) to contents is a pretty straightforward idea given that meaning must be determined by factors involving the thinker’s “head” and factors outside the thinker’s “head”. What is controversial is the nature and importance of these mappings; in particular, whether the “concepts in the head” (the narrow aspect of concepts) that mapping accounts identify are the right kind of items to figure in psychological explanation, and equally importantly, to have a kind of content.

On some accounts of concepts, arguably they are not (at least for the question of content). For example, on Fodor’s (1987, 1998) theory, concepts are individuated by syntax and orthography (or whatever corresponds to orthography in the language of thought) and by reference. Reference is externally determined by what the concept asymmetrically depends on at a world. Only the syntax and orthography is internal. Inferential role, in particular, plays no role in individuating a concept although as part of the context at a world it may play a role in partly determining asymmetric dependence. So on Fodor’s theory, COW is associated with a function which maps a world w onto whatever COW asymmetrically depends on (if anything) at w . On this view, “narrow concepts” are not very interesting – mappings notwithstanding, there doesn’t seem any particular reason to attribute to them their own kind of content.

⁶ “Context” is best understood here as a centered world. For similar ideas see, e.g., Kaplan (1989), Stalnaker (1978), White (1982), Fodor (1987, 1998) and Brian’s earlier (1982) paper, “Must Beliefs Be Sentences?”, Chapter 4 of this volume. These proposals anticipate later developments of two-dimensional semantics; see, e.g., Chalmers 1996, 2006, Chalmers and Jackson 2001, Jackson 1998.

On the other hand, take Frank Jackson's (1998) account. According to it, the relevant internal aspect of a concept has to do with its inferential role, which can be captured by descriptions associated with the concept. For example, WATER has an internal aspect involving narrowly determined descriptions, very roughly, the description *watery stuff, i.e., clear, odorless, etc... liquid around here* which, given facts about the actual world, determines that its reference is H₂O. Accordingly, Jackson thinks that the relevant mappings specify what someone understands when they grasp a concept and that these "narrow concepts" are involved in rationalizing explanations of both thought and action.

Brian wanted narrow content to both figure in psychological explanation and involve its own kind of content. However, he despaired of the idea that there can be narrow descriptions specifying how one privately conceives the world; as we have seen, he was convinced by Putnam and Burge of the sensitivity of that-clauses to social and external factors. This might be behind his rejection of the whole mapping conception of narrow content. To return to his example of the concept GIN and the concept VODKA, Brian suggests that they would be associated with the same mapping as in each case the relevant "functionmaps a context onto whatever liquid is at the origin of a certain kind of causal path leading to the thought" (p. 95). It is not clear, however, what specific account of "narrow concepts" Brian presupposes in his critique that makes him assume that the relevant mappings for GIN and VODKA would be determined by a description such as "whatever liquid is at the origin of a certain kind of causal path leading to the thought".

As it turns out, Brian's own proposal is not so far from the mapping conception. It is that narrow content corresponds to "the set of worlds that are as the thinker personally conceives things as being" (p. 96), *given the context specified at the center*. He calls these, as in his paper "Social Content and Psychological Content" (Chapter 8), *context-indeterminate realization conditions*. But this account can be equally formulated as a *mapping* from centered worlds to content; except, that whereas the previous notion portrays narrow content as a function from context to ordinary content, Brian's realization conditions seem to determine a mapping from contexts to something like "*would-be*" contents, that is, contents that a thought would have if one's conceptions were accurate. So, for example, on the previous conception of narrow content, Bert's concept ARTHRITIS maps the actual world to the disease known as arthritis, whereas on Brian's account, it maps the actual world to a disease both of the joints and muscles. It would be rewarding to fully tease out the relationship between the two accounts; here it will suffice to say that it seems that Brian's notion is the more individualistic and psychological. Brian himself did not say much by way of specifying these worlds, apart from gesturing, somewhat vaguely, at the way subjects conceive the world as being. But, according to him, this is how he saw things must go

with narrow content; attempts to specify it from an objective point of view are doomed; narrow content can only be grasped, if at all, from the subjective perspective.

The other objection he considers to the notion of narrow content he calls the Argument from Unmotivation. It is a kind of skepticism about whether “representational content of any outward-directed kind can be determined by internal physical-functional factors” (p. 96). No objective, third person information about how the brain works can, by itself, justify the ascription of content, it seems, without appeal to some external, causal-informational relation between the brain and the environment. It follows, the argument goes, that one cannot both be a physicalist and an advocate of narrow content. Brian spends the better part of the paper to show why this line of thought is misguided; that the existence of subjective intentionality, or narrow content, is compatible with physicalism in spite of the fact that narrow content is impossible to discern from the objective point of view.

The key strategy Brian employs in defense of this claim anticipates the one he later elaborated in much more detail in his 1990/1997 paper “Phenomenal States” (Chapter 10 in this volume) in defense of the thesis that the existence of phenomenal consciousness is compatible with physicalism even though consciousness is impossible to discern from the objective point of view. Here, as in that paper, he claims that there could be two cognitively independent concepts of the same physical-functional phenomenon; even when this violates what he calls in the later paper the Semantic Premise. The Semantic Premise, recall, is the thesis that an identity statement that links conceptually independent concepts is true only if at least one concept picks out its referent by connoting a contingent property of that referent. The idea in his (1990/1997) paper is that phenomenal concepts involve a “subjective perspective” – they depend on the ability to recognize or discern certain states “in the having of them”. In this way, they pick out their referents directly (so without connoting a contingent property, as do theoretical-physical concepts). This ensures their cognitive independence from physical-functional concepts but is perfectly compatible with physicalism.

There is a parallel to this in the case of our subjective conceptions of intentionality. According to Brian, in the subjective mode we conceive of the meaning of our thoughts directly, without conceiving of any external relation to them as such; rather we conceive of their meaning by *displaying them*, so to speak, in our minds. A reflexive thought (a thought about the meaning of a thought) incorporates in a certain way – not unlike the case of our subjective conceptions of phenomenal states – the thought itself. The directness of our subjective, as Brian puts it, “display-conceptions” of our own thoughts explains their distinctness from any objective physical-functional concepts – the ones appealed to in the Argument from Unmotivation. Nevertheless, as in the phenomenal case, all this is perfectly compatible with physicalism.

However ingenious and important this idea is – and it will yield rich philosophical return in subsequent papers – it doesn't, as Brian seems fully aware, quite provide the answer to the original question which had to do specifically with the existence of *narrow* content. The Argument from Unmotivation poses a challenge to the idea that any purely physical-functional goings-on that narrowly characterize “the head” can constitute content which always seems of an “outward-directed” kind. That meaning can be conceived subjectively and directly (i.e., not *as* an external relation) doesn't mean that what is conceived is *subjective, i.e., narrow intentionality* – that seems like a non-sequitur. Brian's invocation of the phenomenal concept strategy – or rather, in this case, the “subjective intentional concept strategy” – is only partly on target. He hasn't provided reasons to think that when we reflect on the meaning of our own thoughts from the subjective perspective we are reflecting on something like their “narrow” meaning, rather than their ordinary meaning. So there seems to be a crucial difference between the phenomenal and intentional case: whereas phenomenal concepts pick out something narrow, something “in the head”, subjective intentional concepts seem to pick out, in a direct way, an *external relation* between our concepts and their objects.

Brian notices but is unhappy with this interpretation of the situation. What he needs to show to answer the Argument from Unmotivation is that subjective reflection homes in on the *narrow content* of our thought, and it does so in such a direct way that it is impossible to discern this from the objective perspective. But the concept of intentionality could be essentially subjective even if there is no narrow content. The reason he musters for reflection discerning narrow content is not entirely persuasive. He says “[f]or a person may think his thought is about an external object.... when no suitable object exists. That seems as much an instance of the phenomenon as when a suitable object does exist.” (p. 102) But it is quite a leap from the observation that one can apparently think of non-existent objects to the conclusion that there is meaning that is constituted by wholly internal factors. And even if reflection on thoughts about non-existent objects showed that one can reflect on narrow content – since Brian probably does not want to deny that it is possible to reflect subjectively on ordinary (wide) meaning – he needs to explain differences between a “wide” and a “narrow” reflection on content. He will fill in those gaps in his argument in his later papers “Transparent Experience and the Availability of Qualia” and “Phenomenal Intentionality as the Basis of Mental Content” (Chapter 14 and Chapter 15).

Chapter 11, “Can We Explain Intentionality?” (1991). Here Brian offers a critique of Jerry Fodor's asymmetric dependence theory of intentional content. Fodor's account is a version of the idea that meaning is information, that a predicate refers to a property of which its tokens carry information. Such accounts form a crucial part of putative *reductive, naturalistic* explanations of belief, i.e., reductive explanations of what persons believe in terms of physical-functional facts. The question of intentionality was one of the most hotly debated topics in philosophy in the 1980s.

According to the dominant understanding of what naturalizing requires⁷, semantic concepts need to be functionally explicated so as to fit intentionality into the natural, physical order. This paper stakes out, in the context of this program, Brian's unique position on intentionality. His paper has a dual agenda: to criticize Fodor's particular naturalistic account, and through it, the assumption underlying much of the naturalistic program that semantic notions are characterizable in functional terms; and at the same time argue that the failure of these naturalistic accounts doesn't mean the failure of naturalism itself, in the broader, metaphysical sense.

Fodor's asymmetric dependence account is meant to provide a naturalistic solution to the problem of error; how it is that meaning is robust in that it can survive false applications. According to Fodor,

a predicate *F* means a property *P* if things that are *P* cause *F* and any such causal relation between some other property and *F* is asymmetrically dependent on the former relation. (p. 119-120)

So, according to this theory, what explains that your concept SHEEP can be mistakenly applied to a goat is that your false application depends on the *independent* causal relation of sheep to SHEEP but not vice versa.

Brian has various objections to this account for socially deferential terms. He thinks that the account has the best chance of being correct in the case of demonstrative, recognitional concepts. But even in this case, he argues, it doesn't work; it doesn't provide either necessary or sufficient conditions for meaning. The reason lies in the perspectival nature of recognitional concepts, in the fact that some perspectives of use are reference determining, *pace* Fodor. As Brian puts it, "some perspective is part of the sense of the concept, of how it conceives its reference." (p. 129) Appealing to perspective in explaining falsity without asymmetric dependence, and asymmetric dependence without falsity, Brian is trying to make a case for the more general thesis that intentional notions are ineliminable in *any* armchair explication of reference.

The general understanding at the time, and to a large degree ever since, has been that consciousness is the really hard part of the mind-body problem and intentionality is easier to naturalize. Brian disagrees: he argues that they are both equally hard, in fact impossible, to naturalize in the conceptual (if not the ontological) sense, in the sense of providing a philosophical explication in naturalistically "kosher" terms. Building on one of the themes of his paper "Subjective Intentionality" (Chapter 9) in which he suggested that there are essentially subjective, reflective notions of meaning we can form in introspection that are conceptually independent of any objective, physical-functional notion, he now suggests that our *core notions* of meaning – quite like our

⁷ See, e.g., Fodor (1987), Dretske (1981, 1988) and Stalnaker (1984).

core notions of consciousness – themselves are ineliminably subjective; that we cannot form an adequate objective, third person conception of meaning at all. He takes up the task of explicating that core notion of meaning in his paper “Reference from the First Person Perspective” (Chapter 13).

Chapter 12 “Elimination vs Nonreductive Physicalism” (1993)

In this paper Brian explores the metaphysics of mind. Finding both dualism and eliminativism about the mental unattractive, he wonders whether a nonreductive, as opposed to reductive physicalism is a viable alternative. He concludes that it is not. Non-reductive physicalism endorses ontological physicalism (the thesis that all fundamental entities and properties are physical) but denies metaphysical physicalism, i.e. the thesis that mental properties are reducible to physical or functional properties. He further characterizes what an “interesting” non-reductive thesis would have to look like by stipulating that such an account has to 1) be realist about both mental and physical truth; 2) posit no independent causal powers for the mental; and 3) account for how objective mental resemblances can be naturalized. He discusses Stephen Schiffer's nominalist account, sentential dualism. Schiffer is trying to reconcile the apparent irreducibility of the mental with the implausibility of massive causal overdetermination of behavior by mental and physical properties. On his view, there are no mental properties, but there are true mental ascriptions. Mental ascriptions are not reducible to physical statements; nevertheless, physicalism can be true in the ontological sense. Loar argues that, if Schiffer's view is not to be a form of eliminativism – i.e., if it is to be interesting, it runs into the problem of causal overdetermination. He then turns to nonreductive supervenience theses and argues that no such view can be an interesting form of nonreductive physicalism.

Chapter 13 “Reference from the First Person Perspective” (1995).

The last three papers of this volume, of which this is the first, contain Brian’s most developed views on the nature and concept of intentionality and its relationship to phenomenality. Despite the gap in their publication dates, these papers were all written in close succession (the last two papers were already circulating in the late 1990s). The term “phenomenal intentionality”, or “subjective intentionality” as he calls it in his eponymous paper “Subjective Intentionality” (Chapter 10) labels two distinct though related theses. One is a thesis about the subjective nature of our *core concepts* of meaning. This thesis, suggested at the end of “Can We Explain Intentionality?” (Chapter 11) is the topic of this paper. The other is a thesis about the existence of a kind of (narrow) intentionality, distinct from referential intentionality, determined by phenomenology and conceptual role alone. That is the topic of the last two papers in this volume (Chapters 14 and 15).

While this paper has received somewhat less attention than his other “phenomenal intentionality” papers, it contains important and interesting ideas about the concept of meaning and the nature of reference. In it, by way of providing a philosophical analysis of the concept of meaning, Brian actually proposes an argument for the determinacy of reference.

According to Quine’s (1960) inscrutability thesis, there is no fact of the matter as to whether the term “rabbit” refers to rabbits, undetached rabbit parts, un-disconnected rabbit stages, etc. Brian considers this thesis first from the “objective” point of view; from an understanding of reference as a certain sort of causal relation connecting tokenings of the concept to instances of the referent. He points out that the causal relations that seem to be candidates don’t uniquely determine reference. Take a visual-demonstrative concept like THAT TREE, and a relation *O* that is the relation of belonging to a causal chain that prompts the tokening of THAT TREE. *O* doesn’t single out a tree as opposed to a retinal image, a tree surface, undetached tree parts, etc. What seems to secure unique reference is the implicit *qualifying concept* associated with the demonstrative, in this case the concept TREE. But of course the problem of inscrutability arises similarly with kind concepts like TREE; whose determinacy in turn depends on the determinacy of singular demonstratives. Given that the reference of most other types of concept depends in some way, according to Brian, on demonstrative reference, there seems to be no way out of a vicious circle of interpretation.

Brian considers the suggestion that, in the absence of any objective factor that singles out relation *O* as restricted to, say, trees, as opposed to tree surfaces, as the relevant reference relation for THAT TREE, reference is scrutable only by convention. He thinks that while this might strike one as plausible for third person ascriptions of reference, it is “bizarre” when considered in the case of our own thoughts. It is intuitively obvious that, in the first person case, I *know* that my concept THAT TREE refers to *that tree* and not, for example, a collection of undetached parts of that tree.

Brian of course doesn’t think that this in itself is decisive. He points out that this asymmetry between the third person and first person perspectives is quite compatible with – actually, has an explanation in terms of – the disquotational-deflationary theory of reference and truth. But what Brian is interested in is *not* the refutation of the deflationist interpretation of the third-person/first-person asymmetry. He is rather interested in presenting an *alternative* account, in terms of a non-deflationary theory of reference. He proposes an account of reference – via an account of the core, subjective *concept* of reference – that bears out the first person intuition of determinate reference as correct. He acknowledges the force of the Quinean argument, without conceding its point.

Brian explains the core concept of reference in terms of subjective reflection on what he calls “disquotational pairs”, that is, term-object pairs. He asks us to reflect on these by entertaining the concept *THAT TREE*⁸, and THAT TREE; *THAT HAND*, and THAT HAND, etc., where the second member of each pair is a visual-demonstrative concept. Now as you entertain these concepts, the concept and object will appear as linked in a certain, phenomenologically salient way. And here is the central, crucially important idea of the paper: according to Brian, *we think about reference, in the canonical case, as the relation holding between pairs linked in that way.* The concept of reference conceived in this way will have, as Brian puts it, “an appropriate combination of subjective and objective factors: the pairs are those presented as noted, and the relation we conceive as objectively holding of those pairs.” (p. 65)

Brian suggests that “linked in that way” applies across concept-categories, so that pairs across concept categories will have an intuitive phenomenological similarity; pairs such as *THAT TREE*, and THAT TREE; *PLATO* and PLATO; *COPPER* and COPPER will appear similar in a certain way. Consequently, this concept is not tied to particular instances. Rather, it depends on past and potential discriminations of the way disquotational pairs appear to be connected.⁹ As he puts it, “this concept is in its way demonstrative -“that relation”, and ... in a certain way the disquotational, or mention-use, con-figuration constitutes that demonstrative concept's defining perspective.” (p. 65)

The question is: how does providing a phenomenological conceptual counterpart to causal-informational accounts of reference – that is, an account that has “an appropriate combination of subjective and objective factors” – help resolve the issue of the determinacy of reference?¹⁰ Brian’s answer is that it does via showing two things. First, that, on the assumption of referential determinacy, we can explain how it can be that our subjective concept of reference – non-illusorily – tracks which of various external relations qualify as reference for our concepts (so, that the concept THAT TREE indeed refers to that tree and not, say that tree surface). And second, that, at the same time, it is not possible to understand how this can be from the objective, third person perspective – even if reference is indeed determinate. The reason we cannot disambiguate reference from the third person point of view is that, understood

⁸ I use “*” to indicate whatever operation in the mind plays the role quotation plays in language.

⁹ It is important to note that according to Brian, this appearance is purely phenomenal and is not mediated by the concept of reference which would make the account circular and useless for the purposes of Brian’s argument.

¹⁰ Searle (1991, 1992) makes a similar move by appealing to phenomenal consciousness to account for the determinacy of reference that he, as Brian, finds so compelling from the first person case. But he doesn’t explain the discrepancy between the subjective and objective perspectives on indeterminacy by an appeal to the difference in subjective and objective conceptions of reference. For similar ideas, see also Kriegel (2014).

properly, reference has a subjective, phenomenal component that is – just like phenomenal experience itself – is not explicable from the objective perspective. So, in a way, Brian’s strategy is the inverse of the deflationary strategy: whereas the former explains the first person appearance of determinacy as an illusion, Brian explains the third person appearance of indeterminacy as illusion.

This, of course, should not for a moment be taken as a denial that reference consist in perfectly naturalistic, physical-functional relations between concepts and their referents. It is rather an instance of Brian’s general outlook – labeled by Chalmers (2002) in the context of the metaphysics of consciousness “type B materialism” – according to which one should take subjective phenomena and the subjective perspective fully seriously and then explain the failure of various third person strategies to understand the phenomenon via appealing to the conceptual isolation of first person subjective understanding.

Chapter 14, "Transparent Experience and the Availability of Qualia" (2002). In this paper, Brian attempts to combine the representationalist insight about the *transparency* of normal visual experience with the qualiphile commitment to *introspectable* intrinsic qualia. He rejects both what he calls the standard view of raw qualia according to which qualia are not essentially representational, but rather, like paint on canvas, are individuated independently of their representational properties, and what he calls the standard representationalist attack on qualia, according to which no matter how well you try to introspect your normal visual experience, all you will notice is the apparent objects and properties that your visual experience presents. The upshot of the paper is that non-relational, yet intentional, qualia, are needed to explain certain intuitions about phenomenal sameness; and representationalism doesn’t have the resources to do that.

Against representationalism, Brian argues that the Inverted Earth¹¹ thought-experiment shows that it is possible to have qualitatively different color experiences representing the same surface properties of objects and so it cannot be that all we discern when we attend to what it is like to have a certain experience are the represented objects and their properties. At the same time, he also points out that this thought-experiment doesn’t give us a grip on raw, unrepresentational color qualia; the qualitative features we are conceiving of are best regarded as essentially *property-directed* qualia. Property directedness, according to Brian, is part of the phenomenology of perceptual experiences and it is what explains the transparency of normal experience. What two qualitatively identical color experiences, for example, have in common is their property directedness with a certain qualitative character; this property directedness, however, might be involved in presenting different properties or no properties at all.

¹¹ Block (1990).

Brian maintains that introspecting qualia is not easy or natural; we can do it only after abstracting away in thought of the object of the experience.

Because we can make sense of these property directed experiences occurring in the absence of their normal references, we can make sense of property directedness independently of any referential properties. In other words, Brian argues that perceptual experience is essentially intentional – but not essentially representational. In his paper “Phenomenal Intentionality as the Basis of Mental Content” (Chapter 15), he extends this idea to thought by arguing for a kind of intentionality that is independent of representational content.

Chapter 15, “Phenomenal Intentionality as the Basis of Mental Content” (2003).

In this, his last published paper, Brian brings it all together. He mounts a grand defense for the idea that in addition to referential content, thought has a content that is narrow, and non-referential. And even more significantly, he finally provides an answer to the question that has been to some degree up in the air in previous papers: in *what* does narrow content lie? Building on his theme of the narrow intentionality of perceptual experience (Chapter 14), he locates the origins of narrow intentionality for thought in phenomenal features of perceptual experience.

As for his defense of narrow content, he introduces, in addition to briefly rehearsing, or amending earlier ones, an argument from the brain-in-a-vat scenario. Thought experiments like the inverted spectrum, or Inverted Earth scenarios, make sense of introspectable, narrow *qualia*. They show that content can vary while one’s mental states remain qualitatively the same. But they are compatible with *content* being essentially referential content. To make sense of introspectable, *narrow content*, we need, according to Brian, the more potent medicine of brains-in-a-vat.¹² Because, according to Brian, we can coherently conceive of an envatted-brain twin that shares, from the first person point of view, one’s way of perceiving and thinking about the world, we can conceive of narrow, non-referential intentionality. The picture that emerges is one that leaves the view that reference is partly externally determined in place while denying that all content is essentially referential. Of course, Brian doesn’t take intuitions about envatted brains as proof that there is such a thing as internal intentionality. But he thinks they make at least a case for the coherence of the idea. Giving a physicalistically respectable account of what narrow content consists in goes the rest of the way. In the rest of the paper, he presents this account in elaborate detail.

The key idea is that the narrow content of perceptions and thoughts consists in their *directedness*, in their *purporting to refer*. This directedness is a *phenomenal* feature that is shared between me and my envatted-brain twin. Brian explains the intrinsic

¹² For a similar argument see Horgan, Tienson and Graham (2004).

directionality of all thought, step by step, from the phenomenal directionality of perceptual experience, elaborated in more detail in Chapter 14. As he puts it, one cannot phenomenologically separate the purely qualitative aspects of perceptual experience “from its purporting to pick out objects and their properties” (p. 238). The internal aspect of perceptual experience is, in his memorable line, the “paint that points” (p. 251). This phenomenal directionality, which belongs primarily to perceptual states, underlies the phenomenal directionality of singular perceptual demonstratives – like THAT LEMON – that incorporate the perception. Type demonstrative recognitional concepts – like YELLOW, LEMON, etc – pick out a kind by virtue of past perceptions and a disposition to pick out future instances from its defining perceptual perspective. They are *not* descriptions embedding singular perceptual demonstratives; one doesn’t need to have particular instances in mind to have the recognitional concept. Their directionality then doesn’t come from any singular demonstrative concept but from the directionality built into their perspective. The directionality of non-perceptual concepts is more mediated; they acquire their directionality via their conceptual connections with perceptual and other concepts. “The subjective intentional properties of non-perceptual concepts are always a matter of, as it were, looking sideways via their connections with perceptual concepts.” (p. 247) In the end, all thought has its intrinsic directionality derived from its various links to perceptual experience.

In his previous papers (Chapters 8 and 9) Brian hypothesized that narrow, phenomenal intentionality determines what he called *realization conditions*. That view is close to the *mapping conception* of narrow content we discussed earlier; on this view narrow content is something that, given a particular environment, determines a particular broad content. But while some philosophers interpreted Brian’s views in this paper as a variant of the mapping conception;¹³ Brian simply doesn’t return to that idea here. It is probably not that he thought the idea that such a mapping exists is implausible. It is more likely he ignored it because he thought realization conditions could not be specified as such. For one thing, he rejected the idea that narrow content can be descriptively characterized. In the paper he provides a critique of the internalist-descriptivist strategy according to which all our concepts can be considered as descriptions involving narrow concepts that include logical concepts, sensory concepts, the concepts of cause, physical object, and various spatial relations. The problem with this view, according to Brian, is that spatial concepts and even the concept of physical object have a demonstrative element; their reference is externally determined. More generally, he thought that our grasp of narrow content being essentially subjective, even if there *is* an objective specification of it (as he thought there is), we would have no use for it as we wouldn’t see *that* it is an objective equivalent to the subjectively grasped phenomenon.

¹³ Burge (2003) p. 448, Lycan (2008) §13.

Concluding remarks

One might ask what the philosophical significance of the issue of narrow content is. An obvious answer, and one that Brian is explicit about, is that narrow content figures in the best, most plausible understanding of psychological explanation of behavior. But in a broader sense his interest seems driven by his general philosophical outlook. As he put it:

“Conceptions of mental content in the analytic tradition have tended to be phenomenologically impoverished, largely because of the emphasis on language and reference. And when we turn to the phenomenology, as I will try to show, we do get a grip on internal intentionality.”(p. 230)

Brian thought the subjective perspective is essential for self-understanding; and consequently he wanted to explore the mind as fully as possible from the subjective point of view. He found (in Chapter 14 and 15) that the subjective perspective revealed that there is a purely internal aspect to both qualia and intentionality. He further found (in Chapter 11 and 13) that even the idea of reference can't be properly understood from the objective perspective. At the same time, he was equally driven to show that one doesn't have to turn one's back on subjectivity and phenomenology, implausibly sanitizing one's outlook on what is real, to make the world safe for physicalism. Did he succeed in his program? In the case of phenomenal experience, I think the answer is affirmative. The case of intentionality is more difficult; it is harder to see both the obstacles to naturalization, and the solution.

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