

# Is Intentionality a Relation? A Dialogue\*

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## Abstract

This dialogue explores the question of whether *intentionality*—the “ofness”, “aboutness”, or “directedness” of mental states—is a relation. We explore three views: the *Naive View*, on which intentionality is a relation to ordinary, everyday objects, facts, and other such items; the *Abstract Contents View*, on which intentionality is a relation to mind-independent abstract entities that are our contents; and the *Aspect View*, on which intentionality is a matter of having intentional states with particular (non-relational) aspects that are our contents. We consider the challenges facing these views, which include empirical challenges in accounting for all the contents our intentional states can represent, metaphysical challenges in making sense of how contents can be entertained or otherwise represented by us and how they can play a psychological role in the mental economy, and challenges in making sense of how intentionality connects us to the world—if at all. Along the way, we consider the question of how consciousness is related to intentionality and how this affects one's choice of views.

Keywords: intentionality, aboutness, mental representation, content, consciousness, abstract propositions, adverbialism, psychologism, truth, reference

## Prologue

David: Should we write this paper in the form of a dialogue? This would allow us to explore the ideas we disagree on without having to reach an agreement.

Angela: I don't know. People would probably think it's boring and annoying. I don't want to be the target of ridicule.

David: On your view, it's not even clear that people can target you with their thoughts. All they can entertain are their own private ideas “of you”, and it's not clear that those ideas can even single you out. So you're safe!

Angela: Whoa. Are we already getting started? I thought we were still deciding the format.

David: This paper was due six months ago. Just go with it.

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\* Forthcoming in *Argumenta*.

Angela: Okay, but I'm not playing myself.

David: Fine.

## Act 1: The Naive View

Abstractus: What are you thinking about, Concretus?

Concretus: (*Gazing off into the distance*) Justin Bieber. I just can't get him out of my thoughts.

A: I'm sorry to break it to you, but Justin Bieber isn't literally *in your thoughts*.

C: Why do you say that? Obviously, thinking about *Justin Bieber* is a kind of relation to *Justin Bieber*. That's self-evident.

A: I agree that I bear various relations to Bieber (such as the relation *living on the same planet as*), but my thoughts about him don't *consist in* a relation to the real flesh-and-blood Justin Bieber.

(*Concretus puts down their earbuds, which can faintly be heard playing Justin Bieber's Thought of You while resting on the table.*)

C: It looks like we have a serious philosophical disagreement on our hands: we seem to disagree about the nature of "aboutness" or "intentionality".

Let's start by getting clear on what we are talking about. I like to define "intentionality" by reference to paradigm cases, which I think gets at the phenomenon most philosophers aim to pick out using the term. So here are some examples: you might be perceptually experiencing an empty beer bottle on the table, daydreaming about a Justin Bieber concert, or thinking that Justin Bieber is your favorite artist. These states have a feature that we are tempted to describe as their being "of", "about", or "directed at" something, or as their "saying" something. *This* feature is what I call *intentionality*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Concretus' definition of "intentionality" is the one that AM employs and defends (Mendelovici 2018b). DB has often favored a different, "structural" definition of intentionality as a *non-factive relation*, but that is a purely terminological choice. For present purposes, AM's definition is more suitable. For other definitions of "intentionality" in terms of paradigm cases, see Kriegel 2011, Ch. 1, Neander 2017, p. 1, and Shea 2022, p. 3. Brentano (1874) is often credited with introducing intentionality to contemporary discussions and many authors anchor their use of the term "intentionality" in this well-known passage, which serves to single out the same phenomenon:

Every mental phenomenon is characterized by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object, and what we might call, though not wholly unambiguously, reference to a content, direction toward an object (which is not to be understood here as meaning a thing), or immanent objectivity. Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself, although they do not do so in the same way. In presentation, something is presented, in judgment something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired and so on. (Brentano 1874, p. 88)

- A: I would have picked different paradigm examples, but I agree that I disagree with you about the nature of what you call “intentionality”.
- C: Good. It will be useful to introduce a bit more terminology. Mental states that have intentionality—*intentional states*—differ from one another in what they “say”, are “of”, are “about”, or, let us say, *represent*. Let us call what an intentional state represents its *content*.<sup>1</sup>
- A: Wait a minute! Now you're going to say that Justin Bieber is part of the contents of our thoughts. I don't accept that.
- C: I will *argue* for that claim, but the claim is not meant to be true by definition. My definition of the term “content” is neutral on the nature of contents: As far as my definition is concerned, contents could be concrete things, like Justin himself, abstract things (as I suspect you might be tempted to say, given that you're a character named “Abstractus”), or mere properties or features of minds. Nothing we have said so far prejudices this issue.
- A: Okay. I agree your definitions are neutral on the nature of intentionality and contents. On these definitions, we can all agree that there is such a thing as intentionality and that our intentional states have contents. Now we can focus on our disagreement over the nature of intentionality and content. (And, yes, you are right that I will eventually argue that contents are abstract entities.)
- C: One more thing: I think it is helpful to draw a distinction between original and derived intentionality, where *original* intentionality is intentionality that does not depend on other instances of intentionality, while *derived* intentionality is intentionality that is in some way constituted by or dependent on other instances of intentionality. For example, sometimes it is claimed that the intentionality of language is derived from our originally intentional communicative intentions.<sup>2</sup>
- A: That is fine. But we should focus our discussion on original intentionality. Let us omit the qualifier “original” and just mean *original intentionality* by “intentionality” unless we note otherwise.
- C: Sounds good. Let me now state my view, which we can call the *Naive View*: Intentional states are relations between subjects or their internal states to ordinary, everyday objects, facts, and other such items, like Justin Bieber, this empty beer bottle, and the fact that the earth orbits the sun.

This view is commonsensical: it seems to take our ascriptions of mental contents at face value. So,

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<sup>1</sup> A distinction is sometimes made between what are sometimes called the “content” and the “object” of an intentional state. The idea seems to be that intentional states involve two metaphysically distinct components, one involving particular existing objects and one involving something else. However, that there is such a distinction is not pretheoretically obvious. What is available to us pretheoretically is, perhaps, that contents of a propositional form at least sometimes have objectual and proprietorial components (see Mendelovici 2018), but it is not pretheoretically obvious that these components have distinct natures, e.g., one involving a particular object and one involving something of a distinct nature. For this reason, we refrain from employing any distinction between “content” and “object” at this stage of the discussion.

<sup>2</sup> It is an open question whether what are considered to be paradigm cases of derived intentionality are instances of intentionality at all. This does not matter for our purposes.

for example, when you think about Justin Bieber, Justin himself is your content or part of your content and you represent him by being related to him in a special way. When you perceptually experience the empty beer bottle on the table, that bottle, or perhaps the fact that there is an empty beer bottle on the table, is the content of your perceptual experience and you represent it by being related to that portion of reality in the right way.<sup>1</sup>

A: The view seems really... naive.

C: Yes, but this is a virtue! The view is supported by everyday intuition, which is, arguably, supported by our direct introspective access to the phenomenon of intentionality itself. I think we have agreed that introspection gives us some insight into our intentional states and contents—after all, introspection is what allowed us to discover that we have intentional states in the first place! So, surely, we must take its deliverances seriously. And these deliverances support the claim that thinking about Justin Bieber involves a relation to Justin himself. Justin is a constituent of my thought.

A: Maybe I can agree that there is a sense in which it *seems* that our Justin-Bieber thoughts involve Justin Bieber himself (or something along those lines), but we *know* that these appearances are deceiving. That's because you could have just the same introspectable intentional episode seeming to involve Bieber himself even if he didn't exist. In the same way, hallucinations, thoughts about Santa Claus—like the thought that Santa Claus is jolly—and other intentional states about things that don't exist nonetheless *seem* to involve existing everyday objects. But we know that such states are not relations to cups, Santa Claus or facts involving Santa Claus, or other such concrete, everyday items, since we know that these items don't exist. So the fact that when we have Justin-Bieber thoughts the state we introspect upon *seems* to involve Justin Bieber himself does not support the claim that it does. We would be just as likely to have the same seemings even if it did not.

C: You're saying that introspection, and, by extension, intuition supported by introspection, does not support the Naive View because we'd be just as likely to have the same apparent evidence from introspection and the same intuitions if the Naive View were false compared to if it were true.

A: Yes. Any justification you may have had from intuition or introspection for the Naive View is defeated or debunked.<sup>2</sup>

C: Maybe, but the Naive View might anyway be true. It could still be that intentionality is a relation to the everyday items that we intuitively take our intentional states to be about.

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<sup>1</sup> Naive realism about perception (Hinton 1967, Fish 2009, Logue 2012) is the Naive View as applied to perception.

<sup>2</sup> Abstractus' claim, put otherwise, is that introspection is insensitive to the involvement of everyday items in our thoughts. This debunks arguments for the Naive View from the deliverances of introspection. For more on debunking arguments based on insensitivity claims, see Joyce 2005, Korman 2019, and Clarke-Doane 2020. Abstractus' argument employs a probabilistic and comparative notion of insensitivity like that proposed by Bourget and Mendelovici (MS) and Mendelovici and Bourget (MS).

A: Not so fast, Belieber. There are two major problems with your view: the inventory problem and the metaphysical problem.<sup>1</sup>

The *inventory problem* for the Naive View is that there aren't the right entities of the right kinds to account for all the intentional states that we have. In particular, the Naive View cannot handle cases of intentional states representing things that don't exist or facts that don't obtain. For example, we sometimes have thoughts about Santa Claus and hallucinations of full beer bottles. Not only do such states allow us to debunk any evidence from introspection for the Naive View, but they also form the basis of an argument *against* the view: We can have such states, but the Naive View can't account for them since there are no candidate everyday objects with which to identify their contents.<sup>2</sup>

C: I see the worry, but why can't I just say that in these cases we are wrong to think that we represent any contents at all? Our Santa-Claus thoughts turn out to have no content; our hallucinatory full-beer-bottle experiences are of or about nothing.

A: Your response to the inventory problem fails. It amounts to denying that we have contentful states when we think Santa-Claus thoughts or have full-beer-bottle hallucinations. But surely our minds are not *empty* when we have such states. Though we might not be introspectively aware of the nature of our contents in particular cases, we are at least aware that we *have* contents in these cases—we can tell that we represent *something*. So it will not do to deny that these states have contents. (Of course, we should still deny that there is anything in the world that our contents correspond to, pick out, or refer to, but that's a separate claim.)

A second problem with your response is that the resulting view cannot distinguish between intentional states representing *different* non-existents. Surely, the thought that Santa Claus is jolly differs from the thought that Pegasus is jolly; when we think them, we think something different. Likewise, a hallucination of a full beer bottle on the table differs from a hallucination of an octopus wrapped around your arm; we represent something different in the two cases.

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<sup>1</sup> A theory of intentionality should be both empirically adequate and provide metaphysically sufficient conditions for intentionality. The inventory problem and the metaphysical problem are failures to meet these two conditions, respectively. See Mendelovici and Bourget forthcoming.

<sup>2</sup> See also Kriegel 2007, Sainsbury 2010, Crane 2013, Voltolini 2006, and Jacob 2003. The Naive View arguably also has trouble accommodating intentional states that represent the same everyday objects but in different ways, such as a thought that Justin Bieber is a pop star and a thought that Rick the Sizzler is a pop star. The problem is that there do not exist enough distinct everyday objects to account for the distinct contents of Justin-Bieber thoughts and Rick-the-Sizzler thoughts. The Naive View also arguably has trouble accommodating intentional states representing vague or indeterminate contents, like the desire to meet a Belieber. The problem is that in having the desire to meet a Belieber, there is no particular Belieber one wants to meet. But there are no non-particular or "indeterminate" Beliebers out there, so it seems there are no Belieber-like entities that can figure in the contents of the desire to meet a Belieber.

Together with the problem of accounting for intentional states representing things that don't exist or facts that don't obtain, these three problems are the non-linguistic analogues of Chisholm's (1957) three marks of intentionality (with an "s") in language. They are the traditional problems for the Naive View (see Jacob 2003).

C: I do see the worries. Maybe the representation of non-existents needs to be treated differently than the representation of existents; maybe in the case of representing non-existents, our contents are not ordinary objects but something else, perhaps something abstract or mental.

A: You are suggesting that there are two very different ways in which we can have intentional states. But this seems completely *ad hoc*. There is no independent motivation for thinking that intentional states about non-existents have a different nature than other intentional states. Introspectively, the two kinds of intentional states are relevantly alike. You couldn't tell from introspection alone that your Santa-Claus thoughts have a different nature than your Bieber-thoughts. And the two kinds of intentional states play relevantly similar psychological roles. Your Bieber-thoughts play the same roles in inference and the generation of behaviour regardless of whether Bieber actually exists. So there is no reason, other than saving your theory, to suppose that intentional states about existents and non-existents have different natures.<sup>1</sup>

C: Okay, I suppose it is somewhat problematic to say that intentional states can be constituted in these two different ways. But perhaps I can bite the bullet here and accept this in order to preserve the intuition that at least in "good" cases, cases where the relevant entities exist, intentionality is a relation to them.

A: There's also the second problem, the *metaphysical problem*: Intentionality, on the Naive View, is supposed to be a relation between subjects or internal states of subjects and things in the world. But it's unclear how being related to a concrete object, fact, or other item existing somewhere beyond you—in a different place and perhaps even time—could somehow bring that thing into your mind, make it present for you, or allow you to entertain or represent it. After all, what is represented makes a difference for us. It makes a difference for us whether, for example, we represent that grass is green or that  $2+2=4$ . It affects our phenomenology, the further mental states we're likely to have, and our behaviour. The problem is that there could be no such relation between a subject (or their internal states) and things in the world that makes such a difference for that subject. After all, no other relation has such an effect on its relata. Relations like *living on the same planet as*, *being taller than*, *being within two meters of*, and even the relation of causation do not make this kind of difference for their relata. In light of that, it seems implausible that there is a relation that we bear to things that brings them into our minds and allows them to play the psychological roles they manifestly play.<sup>2</sup>

C: I agree that no other relations have the unique features of intentionality, but that is just to say that intentionality is different from other relations. Perhaps intentionality is a primitive relation, irreducible to any others. Or perhaps this relation is none other than a relation of consciousness or awareness. If we accept a relational view of phenomenal consciousness<sup>3</sup>—the subjective, experiential, qualitative, or "what it's like" aspect of experience<sup>4</sup>—we might be able to identify

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<sup>1</sup> This is a generalization of the "spreading step" against disjunctivism in arguments from illusion and hallucination (see Crane and French 2021).

<sup>2</sup> For these kinds of worries, see Kriegel 2011, Putnam 1982, Papineau 2021, and Mendelovici 2018b, Ch. 9.

<sup>3</sup> See Bourget 2019a and 2019b for a defence of relationalism about consciousness.

<sup>4</sup> See Nagel 1974, Chalmers 1995, and Levine 1983 for the notion of phenomenal consciousness.

(original) intentionality with phenomenal consciousness, which might help us make sense of how intentionality brings objects outside the mind into our awareness.

- A: You can say all that, but I don't think the resulting position is even coherent, because no relation could do this job, not even a primitive one that you call "intentionality", not even one that you identify with phenomenal consciousness. Our contents are *part of our minds* in a way that external objects cannot be.
- C: I don't think the view is incoherent. Why couldn't my mind encompass external objects?<sup>1</sup> This seems at least coherent. I can imagine that if Justin were to suddenly disappear from the face of the earth (God forbid!) my thoughts would instantly be changed, ceasing to be Bieber-thoughts.
- A: Even if the view is coherent, it still seems really implausible and *ad hoc*. You're just saying that there is a primitive relation, unlike any other relation that we know of, that does exactly the job you need it to do.
- C: I don't suppose you have a better view?
- A: I do...

## Act 2: The Abstract Contents View

- A: My view, like yours, Concretus, takes intentionality to be a relation between subjects or their internal states and contents that exist independently of the mind. But I disagree with you about what these contents are. On your view, they are the ordinary objects, facts, or other items that we might naively take ourselves to represent, like Justin Bieber. On my view, they are abstract entities.

In short, my view, which we can call the *Abstract Contents View*, states that intentionality is a relation between subjects or their internal states and mind-independent abstract entities that are our contents. By calling these entities "mind-independent", I mean that they exist independently of being represented. By calling them "abstract", I mean that they exist independently of what's happening in space-time. For example, when you believe that Justin Bieber is a pop star, you might bear a relation to the abstract proposition that the individual with such-and-such features is a pop star.<sup>2</sup>

Like you, Concretus, I am attracted to the view that (original) intentionality is identical to phenomenal consciousness. Perhaps consciousness, then, is a relation to abstract entities. The resulting combination of views not only explains (original) intentionality but also phenomenal consciousness, taking it to be a relation to abstract entities that, presumably, are identical to the

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<sup>1</sup> As McDowell (1994) argues.

<sup>2</sup> The Abstract Contents View has been the dominant view at least since Frege (1918) and Russell (1912), who each held a version of it. Although Russell held that contents could sometimes contain individuals (such as the self), he denied that ordinary objects like chairs and tables could form parts of our contents, which he took to be mainly composed of universals. Mixed views are possible as well; see, e.g., Schellenberg 2010.

phenomenal characters of our experiences, where an experience's *phenomenal character* is its particular "what it's likenesses". I think the overall view is attractive, but alternative views of the relationship between consciousness and intentionality are possible. The Abstract Contents View can be combined with a naturalistic view of the nature of the intentionality relation, taking it to be a matter of causation, natural functions, or relations of isomorphism between internal states and abstract entities.<sup>1</sup>

My view avoids the Naive View's inventory problem, since it can handle cases of intentional states about things that don't exist. Your Santa-Claus-thought is a relation to an existing abstract entity, perhaps an abstract proposition or an abstract cluster of properties. So, even though the concrete world does not contain a Santa Claus or any facts involving Santa Claus, there are Santa-Claus-related contents available for you to represent, so we can say that your Santa-Claus-thoughts have contents. Likewise, in the case of hallucinating a full beer bottle, we are related to something abstract and existing, like the abstract proposition that there is a full beer bottle on the table.

The view also avoids the metaphysical problem with the Naive View. Since contents are abstract, they have no spatiotemporal locations, so they are not located somewhere other than subjects. They are, in a sense, *everywhere*. So there is no question of how a relation to something located somewhere other than where we are can make that thing entertained by our minds.

- C: I have a pressing question: On your view, how do I think that Justin Bieber is a pop star if Justin himself, who is a concrete being, is not a part of my thought?
- A: There are different versions of the view. On my favoured version, your Bieber-thoughts have existentially quantified contents to the effect that something with such-and-such properties is a pop star.<sup>2</sup> They count as being Bieber-thoughts because Bieber is the individual that satisfies them sufficiently well.
- C: I see. I suppose this does the job, but this existentially quantified view of thoughts "about individuals" doesn't seem to do justice to their phenomenology, to how these thoughts strike us introspectively. When I'm representing the Bieberator, or just my earbud here on the table, I seem to be representing a particular, not some generality.<sup>3</sup>
- A: I've heard this one before. Let's focus on the case of the contents of experience, where the phenomenology is most salient. It is a common observation that we can't identify particular objects just by the way they appear to us in experience. If I swapped your earbud with a qualitatively

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<sup>1</sup> The Abstract Contents View is defended in Bourget 2019a and 2019b.

<sup>2</sup> Abstractus endorses *descriptivism*, a view that originates with Russell (1905) in contemporary analytic philosophy. It has been subjected to numerous criticisms, most notably those of Kripke (1980) and is now widely rejected. Nonetheless, it has contemporary defenders (Jackson 1998, Kroon 1987, Pitt 1999, and, in spirit but not letter, Chalmers 2006b). Mendelovici (2019a, 2018b, ch. 5, forthcoming-b) takes descriptions and, in some cases, the external items that satisfy them, to be derivatively represented. Since the main concerns we want to explore for the Abstract Contents View are orthogonal to Kripke-style objections to descriptivism, we don't complexify Abstractus' view to handle these objections; see the aforementioned works by Jackson and Chalmers for discussion.

<sup>3</sup> For phenomenological arguments for the presence of particulars in experience, see Schellenberg 2010, Campbell 2002, and Martin 2002. See also Mendelovici (forthcoming-b) for discussion.



identical earbud, you wouldn't be able to tell based on your visual experiences alone. I say that's because *particulars* are not part of the contents of your experiences. Of course, you seem to experience *a particular earbud*, but this appearance can be accounted for by saying you represent *particularity*, a generic property, not *a particular*. You represent *that there is a particular earbud-shaped thing*, which is a generic proposition. I think that is true not only of visual experience, but of all forms of (original) intentionality. The things we immediately grasp are generic propositions, which are fully abstract objects.<sup>1</sup>

- C: I really don't think that's an accurate description of our intentional contents. When I represent my earbuds, I am not representing an existentially quantified proposition to the effect that there exists some thing that has some generic properties of whiteness, roundness, etc. but rather a singular proposition to the effect that a *particular* earbud—call it *Earb*—has a *particular* whiteness, a particular roundness, etc.
- A: Really? I just don't find that my mind has a grip on any particular particulars like that. Again, you can't tell Earb apart from Bearb (the replacement earbud). In what sense is Earb part of your content if you absolutely can't tell that Earb rather than Bearb is present based on your content? This would be like saying that you are representing something as square even though you can't tell whether what you represent implies that something is square or, instead, that something is round.<sup>2</sup>
- C: A related but distinct concern is that your view fails to do justice to the fact that we can represent *concrete things* as opposed to *abstracta*. Suppose I desire to drink from the full beer bottle that I hallucinate as being before me. Your view predicts that the content of my desire is an abstract proposition or some other abstract entity. But I don't want something abstract—I want something concrete: beer!<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Abstractus is rejecting particularism about experience (Campbell 2002, Gomes and French 2016). See Bourget 2019a for a more sophisticated version of Abstractus' argument.

<sup>2</sup> Angela: I don't really like this exchange about Earb and Bearb.

David: Me neither, but this trading of phenomenological judgments is pretty representative of this debate.

Angela: My problem is that Concretus and Abstractus are both making the same mistake: They are assuming that you can read the deep nature of our contents off of their superficial characters. Contents' *deep natures* are what they are, deep down, metaphysically speaking—e.g., abstract entities, concrete entities, ideas in the mind of God.

Contents' *superficial characters* are the superficial characteristics that identify them to us as the intentional contents that they are. If we accept this distinction, we can agree with Concretus that some intentional states come with a "phenomenology of singularity" while remaining open to Abstractus' claim that they do not have a singular deep nature. (See Mendelovici 2018a, forthcoming-b.)

David: I don't really like this distinction between superficial characters and deep natures. It's not like you can "shave off" what a content "says" from what it "is". The whole idea of a content is that it *is* what your mental state *says*. If you don't think the entire nature of a content is part of what the representing state says, you will need to explain what is part of what is said from what is not. You can't just say that some parts are and some are not.

Angela: I'm not fully satisfied with the distinction, either, but I do think we can sensibly talk about *which* contents or which types of contents we're representing (e.g., singular contents or existentially quantified contents) without incurring commitments about whether these contents are abstract propositions, concrete facts, etc. Anyways, your favoured view—the Abstract Contents View—will need to appeal to something like this distinction, too. Just wait until Concretus' next objection about desiring a beer...

<sup>3</sup> Harman (1990) and Kriegel (2007) raise such worries.

- A: First off, I don't think you actually ever really desire "a beer". What you desire is that you have a beer. In other words, I accept a kind of *propositionalism* about desires: the contents of desires are propositions. But this doesn't mean that when you desire a beer, you desire a proposition. Desiring a proposition, according to my propositionalism, would be a matter of desiring that one has a proposition or something like that—it would be standing in the desiring relation to a proposition involving propositions.<sup>1</sup>
- C: Okay, fine, let's say we accept that my desire for a beer is really a desire that I have a beer. Still, I don't think that we should identify the content of my desire with an abstract proposition! What I desire is that I have a concrete beer—that a concrete fact concretely obtains, a fact in which I concretely have a concrete beer!
- A: I can account for your sense that what you want is a concrete beer by putting concreteness into your content. The content of your desire is the proposition *that you have a concrete beer*. If this proposition obtains, there will be a concrete fact in which you concretely have a concrete beer. This is all there is to desiring a *concrete* beer. I can't see what else might be required.
- C: But even a proposition with the abstract property of concreteness in it isn't itself concrete, and the content of my desire is something concrete.
- A: But when the content of your desire is not satisfied, your content is not concrete, right? It is only concrete once the desire is satisfied. That's exactly what my view predicts: once your desire is satisfied, the proposition that is its content obtains, which on my view means that it's a fact. A fact is as concrete as can be.
- C: But what I want is something concrete! So even when my desire is not satisfied, its content is concrete.
- A: No view can give you what you want, Concretus, because there simply are no concrete facts that do not obtain. You don't have a beer!
- C: I guess...<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes we express the contents of desires using noun phrases rather than that-clauses. For example, we might say "I desire a beer." According to Abstractus (and DB), this is shorthand for something like "I desire that I have a beer." For discussion of propositionalism, see den Dikken al (2018) and other chapters in Grzankowski & Montague (2018).

<sup>2</sup> David: You see, Abstractus didn't appeal to your deep nature/superficial character distinction like you predicted a few footnotes ago.

Angela: I think they did, albeit obliquely. Abstractus takes the content that we might describe as "(the fact) that I have a (concrete) beer" to be, despite appearances, something that is abstract. It might appear that this is incoherent, that Abstractus is saying that something is both concrete and abstract at the same time. We resolve the incoherence by accepting that a content with the superficial character of concreteness has an abstract deep nature. Since, as Abstractus forces Concretus to concede, *no* view can say that unsatisfied desires are relations to facts, everyone has to agree that there is a distinction between the superficial features that characterize our contents and their deep natures. The two fail to line up in the way we might naively suppose.

(*Mentalicus joins the conversation.*)

Mentalicus: I couldn't help but overhear your discussion, so I thought I'd come over to tell you that you're both wrong and for pretty much the same reasons. I agree with Abstractus that the Naive View succumbs to the inventory problem and the metaphysical problem—but, it turns out, the Abstract Contents View succumbs to them, too.

A: Please explain.

M: Here's why the Abstract Contents View does not really avoid the Naive View's inventory problem, at least not without significant cost:

Consider the case of perceptually representing redness. Arguably, nothing in the world is red, not in the sense of “red” that picks out the property that our perceptual experiences represent things as having.<sup>1</sup> Of course, objects have certain surface reflectance properties—certain dispositions to reflect, transmit, or emit certain proportions of certain wavelengths of light or the categorical bases of such dispositions—but, arguably, such properties are not what we represent when we represent a ripe tomato as red. Redness is a primitive property in that it is not made up of other properties (unlike, arguably, the property of being Santa Claus, which can plausibly be said to be a complex property involving various properties that are associated with Santa Claus). And, arguably, this property of redness is uninstantiated—nothing has it.<sup>2</sup>

If you don't think redness is uninstantiated, you can replace the example with that of any uninstantiated primitive property that we can represent, since any such property will raise the same problem for the Abstract Contents View.<sup>3</sup> The problem is that in order to explain the representation of redness, the view must accept the existence of uninstantiated properties or propositions that are something over and above any instantiated properties and existing items in the concrete world.

And this is where, I think, many people will get off the boat. We might be happy to accept “Aristotelian” universals—abstract properties that “inhere” in their concrete instances—or other abstract items that are somehow nothing over and above what exists in the concrete world. But the Abstract Contents View requires us to accept “Platonic” abstracta, abstracta that are something over

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David: On Abstractus' view, the content of the desire is not "the fact that I have a (concrete) beer"—not even on its face! So there is no need to appeal to a deep nature/superficial character distinction, since the content that Abstractus ascribes to the desire is precisely the content that, on reflection, we intuitively want to ascribe.

<sup>1</sup> This redness is what Chalmers (2006a) calls “Edenic redness”.

<sup>2</sup> Why not identify the dispositional and categorical properties of objects with represented colours? The relevant dispositional and categorical properties are both *qualitatively* and *structurally* different from represented colours (see, e.g., Hardin 1988, Pautz 2013, Mendelovici 2018b, Ch. 4, Mendelovici and Bourget 2019, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> See Atkins 1996 for relevant discussion of temperature perception. See also Chalmers 2006a and Cutter 2021 for the view that much of perceptual experience involves the representation of uninstantiated properties, many of which are arguably primitive.

and above the concrete world. And the existence of Platonic abstracta is implausible. For the Abstract Contents View, the concrete world is not enough!<sup>1</sup>

A: If the best way to explain intentionality requires us to accept Platonic abstracta, then we should accept this. Ontology is hostage to its applications—we accept the existence of entities because this allows us to explain things. Beyond this and direct observation, there is no reasonable way of justifying ontological commitments. So the mere fact that my view incurs ontological commitments to explain something is not an objection to it. In fact, I think accepting the existence of uninstantiated properties would be a small price to pay to solve the mysteries of intentionality. Anyways, so far, it is the *only* viable view we've got.<sup>2</sup>

M: I agree that if the Abstract Contents View is the only or best way to explain intentionality, then we should accept whatever ontological commitments it incurs. But I don't think it is even *a* way to explain intentionality.

This brings me to my second worry with the Abstract Contents View, which is that it doesn't really avoid the metaphysical problem with the Naive View. The Naive View's problem is that we can't make sense of how bearing a relation to Bieber could result in our being somehow presented with a Bieber-content, having a Bieber-content in mind, or entertaining or otherwise representing a Bieber-content and having it play a psychological role in the mind. You suggested that the Abstract Contents View avoids this problem by denying that contents are located somewhere other than representing subjects, which you do by denying that contents have spatiotemporal locations at all.

A: Yes. That is an accurate summary of what I said.

M: But the Abstract Contents View does not really avoid the metaphysical problem. Something that has no spatiotemporal location still fails to be located at the same time and place as a representing subject. So it is still mysterious how bearing a relation to this independently-existing content can somehow bring it into a representing subject's mind, making it entertained or otherwise represented by the subject and available to play whatever psychological roles contents play. It is mysterious how bearing a relation to an abstract entity could do this work.

In fact, taking contents to be abstract exacerbates the problem. Intentionality is a concrete, here-and-now phenomenon. As you said earlier, contents are not idle—they play a psychological role in the cognitive economy. They might be causally or otherwise involved in the generation of further mental states or behaviours; they might be available for us to form higher-order thoughts; and they might be causally or constitutively related to our phenomenal experiences or the phenomenology of "grasping" a content. Whatever else contents do, they are presented to us, entertained by us, or otherwise

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<sup>1</sup> For arguments along these lines, see Kriegel 2011, Schellenberg 2010, Crane 2013, and Mendelovici 2018b, Ch. 9. The debate over the plausibility of Platonism's ontological commitments has a long history. An important development is that most proponents of Platonic universals only recognize a fairly limited set of such universals—they don't take all contents to be Platonic universals. Usually, only a certain set of primitive and/or "natural" properties are granted the status of Platonic universals. See Balaguer 2008 for an overview.

<sup>2</sup> This argument is elaborated in Bourget 2019b in response to the inventory problem.

represented by us. In short, contents at least partly cause or constitute concrete bits of the world. So, contents cannot be something abstract.

A: I see. The worry is that a relation to abstracta can't make abstracta entertained or otherwise represented by us. Part of the alleged problem is that abstract things can't make a difference for the concrete world—this would be mysterious, maybe even incoherent. But I think abstracta *can* make a concrete difference. One view of properties is that they are Platonic universals that make concrete objects the ways they are through a relation of "exemplification" or "instantiation".<sup>1</sup> On this view, abstracta don't just make some difference to the concrete world—they constitute *every* difference in that their being instantiated is what constitutes the concrete world! This view is coherent, I think. But if we accept that it is coherent that one relation (instantiation) to abstracta constitutes the concrete world, we should accept that there could be a second relation to abstracta (intentionality) that also constitutes the concrete world, albeit in a different way. I think mental states are constituted partly through representation rather than instantiation. Just like states constituted solely by the instantiation of properties, mental states can play causal roles and are perfectly concrete. This fully addresses your worry, since we can now see how a relation to something abstract can have the kinds of concrete effects you take intentionality to have.<sup>2</sup>

M: I am not sure that Platonism about universals is coherent. But even if it is, one could worry that instantiation either is not a relation or is a special relation in that it is the only relation in virtue of which abstracta can make a concrete difference—it is the relation by virtue of which concrete things are certain ways.<sup>3</sup> If instantiation is not a relation or if it is a relation with a special status, then we cannot argue by analogy that intentionality can be a relation to abstracta that likewise affects the concrete world. And even if we could use the analogy with instantiation to argue that your view is not incoherent, this would not remove the mystery shrouding the Abstract Contents View. It would be quite mysterious for there to be a *second* relation, a relation distinct from instantiation, by means of which abstracta can affect the concrete world. Like the Naive View, the resulting view seems implausible and *ad hoc*.

A: I am not overly concerned with there being two special relations to abstracta, one that underlies things being a certain way and one that underlies intentionality. I do agree that there are puzzles in the vicinity, but I believe metaphysicians have worked out some plausible solutions.<sup>4</sup> I don't suppose you have a less mysterious view?

M: I do...

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<sup>1</sup> This is the standard Platonic view of properties (see Balaguer 2008).

<sup>2</sup> See Bourget (2019a,b) for more discussion.

<sup>3</sup> Mentalistic is thinking that instantiation cannot be a relation because a vicious regress (a version of "Bradley's regress" threatens): since relations need to be instantiated in order for things to be related, instantiation would itself need to be instantiated in order for properties to be instantiated, and these instantiations would themselves need to be instantiated, and so on. See Perovic (2014) and Orilia and Paoletti (2020) for discussions of the problem and possible solutions.

<sup>4</sup> See the review articles cited in the previous footnotes.

### Act 3: The Aspect View

M: The root of the problem with the Naive View and the Abstract Contents View is that they take contents to exist independently of the mind. In order to represent them, our minds have to somehow reach out and become related to them in the right way. This results in the inventory problem because the mind's representational capacities are limited by a pre-existing inventory of existing things beyond the mind. And the picture results in the metaphysical problem because it's mysterious how being related to some independently existing entity can somehow bring it into the mind, allow us to entertain it, and allow it to play a psychological role for us. In short, these problems arise for the Naive View and the Abstract Contents View because they take intentionality to be a relation to a stock of independently existing entities. But what if I told you that our minds can create their own contents, that the power to represent lies fully within our minds?

On the *Aspect View*, intentionality is a matter of having intentional states with particular aspects that are our contents, where an *aspect* of a state is a dependent constituent part of the state, the state itself, or a property of the state, property of a property of the state, etc. On this view, contents do not exist independently of our intentional states; instead, they are integral features or components of our minds.<sup>1</sup>

A: I have a good grip on what contents are on the Naive View and on the Abstract Contents View—they are everyday objects or abstract entities, respectively. But I am not really clear on what they are on the Aspect View. What is it exactly that we entertain or otherwise represent?

M: What contents are on the Aspect View depends on how we flesh out the view. Like both of you, I think (original) intentionality is identical to phenomenal consciousness (though, like the other two views we've discussed, the Aspect View is compatible with alternative views of the relationship between consciousness and intentionality).<sup>2</sup> On the version of the Aspect View that identifies intentionality with phenomenal consciousness, contents are aspects of phenomenal states, which might most naturally be taken to be phenomenal characters—the particular "what it's likenesses" of our phenomenal states. These are the properties of phenomenal states that characterize them as the phenomenal states that they are. For example, an experience of redness has a reddish phenomenal character. On the version of the Aspect View that identifies intentionality with phenomenal consciousness, the content of this experience is identical to this reddish phenomenal character. Likewise, an experience of a red triangle has a reddish-trianglish phenomenal character. This phenomenal character is identical to the content of this experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Versions of the Aspect View have been defended by Pitt (2009), Kriegel (2011), Crane (2013), Woodward (2016), Stratman (2022), BonJour (1997), Gow (2021), and Mendelovici (2018b). On Pitt's (2009) version of the view, intentional contents are psychological types. Kriegel (2011), in contrast, holds that intentional contents are second-order intentional properties (or "ways of representing"). For Crane (2013), intentionality is a primitive non-relational phenomenon. Brentano (1874), Husserl (1900/2000), and Anscombe (1965) also can be interpreted as holding versions of the view. See Kriegel (2018) for relevant discussion of Brentano's views of intentionality.

<sup>2</sup> See Gow 2021 for a version of the Aspect View that does not identify intentionality with phenomenal consciousness.

So, on this version of the Aspect View, contents—what we entertain or otherwise represent—are phenomenal characters. But note that I do not accept a relational view of phenomenal consciousness, like you two do. Instead, I accept a more traditional view, on which phenomenal states are intrinsic states of subjects and phenomenal characters are non-relational properties of those states.

A: So why should we accept your view?

M: The main reason is that it avoids the inventory and metaphysical problems that afflict relational views like the Abstract Contents View and the Naive View.

The Aspect View avoids the inventory problem by not requiring contents to exist beyond the mind in order for us to represent them. We don't need a pre-existing stock of Platonic abstracta or everyday objects corresponding to everything we can represent—all we need is intentional states themselves.

The Aspect View avoids the metaphysical problem by denying that intentionality requires that we somehow reach beyond the mind and grab hold of some independently existing items that serve as our contents. Instead, contents are integral aspects of our internal states—they are kicking around in our heads, available to play whatever psychological roles contents might play.

A: I'm not sure that these arguments for the Aspect View over the alternative views are successful. But, in any case, I have four objections to the view itself.

M: Four?! Did you come up with them just now?

A: Well, most of them are problems plaguing views that the Aspect View reminds me of.

My first problem is what we might call the *privacy problem*, and it afflicts any view that takes contents to be private, belonging to a single individual: The problem for the Aspect View is that if contents are integral aspects of intentional states, then it seems that contents cannot be shared between subjects. So then how can we ever represent the same thing? How, for instance, can we ever agree or disagree over the same proposition?<sup>1</sup>

M: I do think that, strictly speaking, we each entertain our own private contents. What you are thinking or otherwise representing is numerically distinct from what I am thinking or otherwise representing. But you and I can still have contents of the same (or similar) *types* (which we might come to have thanks to being similarly constituted and having similar enough histories). This is enough to account for what is going on when, say, we disagree over the truth of the same proposition.<sup>2</sup>

A: I suppose that's good enough. Let me move on to my second objection: At least some versions of the Aspect View sound a lot like *adverbialism* about perception, the non-relational view of perceptual experience on which what it is to have a perceptual experience is to perceive in a certain way. So, for

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<sup>1</sup> Frege (1918) raises privacy worries about psychologism in mathematics and logic. See Pitt (2009) for discussion of this worry in the case of psychologistic views of intentionality.

<sup>2</sup> See Pitt 2009 and Mendelovici 2018, section 9.3.2.

example, according to adverbialism, what it is to perceive a blue triangle is to perceive bluely-triangularly. The version of the Aspect View that takes contents to be properties of intentional states is a generalization of adverbialism—it is effectively an adverbial view of *all* intentional states.<sup>1</sup>

M: Yes. On this version of the Aspect View, what it is to represent blue is to represent in a certain way, *bluely*. Likewise, we can say that what it is to represent Bieber is to represent in a Bieberly way.

A: I don't love the idea of me doing anything in a "Bieberly" way. But anyways, the main worry with adverbialism is Jackson's (1977) many-property problem, and it seems that this "adverbialist" version of the Aspect View faces this problem, too.<sup>2</sup> The *many-property problem*, in a nutshell, is that adverbialism's account of what it is to represent a blue triangle next to a red square is identical to its account of what it is to represent a blue square next to a red triangle: both states are a matter of representing redly, triangularly, bluely, and squarely. The problem is that the two states have different contents but adverbialism predicts that they have the same content (or at least a content of the same type).

M: The many-property problem does not refute the adverbialist version of the Aspect View. It shows only that we need an account of intentional structure. Intentional states are structured in that they contain parts that are also intentional states. These parts come together within a whole that is more than the mere aggregate of its parts. For example, representing a red triangle next to a blue square involves representing redness, representing triangularity, representing blueness, and representing squareness. But it is more than just an aggregate of these intentional states—which is why it is a distinct state from that of representing a red square and a blue triangle. Likewise, representing that Justin Bieber is a pop star involves representing Justin Bieber and representing being a pop star, but it is more than the mere aggregate of these constituent intentional states.

Accounting for intentional structure is a problem for everyone, and hence not a reason to reject the Aspect View in favour of another view. Every view that takes intentional states to have some kind of internal structure faces the question of what is the relation between an intentional state's parts and the structured whole. For example, a view that takes intentional states to be relations to structured propositions must make sense of how the parts of a proposition—presumably, properties and perhaps objects—come together to form a structured whole that is more than the mere aggregates of its parts, or it must take structured propositions to be somehow fundamental.<sup>3</sup>

Many views of intentional structure are possible. *Combinatorial* views take structured wholes to be nothing over and above their parts combined in a certain way (e.g., all it is to represent that Bieber is a pop star is to represent Bieber, to represent the property of being a pop star, and to have these intentional states combined in a certain way). The worry with combinatorial views is that it is unclear how any combination of intentional states or contents can yield more than a mere aggregate of intentional states or contents. *Holistic* views might instead take wholes to be more fundamental than

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<sup>1</sup> For adverbialism about perception, see Chisholm 1957 and Ducasse 1942. For a contemporary defense, see Gow 2021. Kriegel (2008, 2011) calls his version of the Aspect View "adverbialism".

<sup>2</sup> For discussion of the many-property problem, see also Crane and Grzankowski 2022 and D'Ambrosio 2021.

<sup>3</sup> This is the problem of the unity of the proposition. See Gaskin 2008. See also Mendelovici 2018, section 9.3.3.



any components they contain (e.g., representing that Bieber is a pop star is a fundamental state, with representing Bieber and representing the property of being a pop star being dependent constituents— aspects—of this state). The worry with holistic views is that it seems that, for example, we can represent Bieber without representing that Bieber is a pop star. So it really does seem that structured intentional states contain other intentional states as parts. My favoured view, for what it's worth, takes wholes and parts to both be fundamental. On this view, parts can exist independently of the whole (you can represent Bieber without representing that Bieber is a pop star) and wholes are more than just the parts combined in a particular way.<sup>1</sup>

But which view is correct does not matter for our purposes. What matters is that every view of intentionality must say something to account for intentional structure, with similar options available for different views.

A: I am not entirely convinced, but let's move on to my third worry, which is more serious. The more I hear about the view, the more puzzled I become about this talk of bluish-trianglish aspects. I don't really understand what they are supposed to be. I want to say my experience is of a blue triangle. So its content is or involves the properties of blueness and triangularity—the properties that an external-world object would have to have in order for my experience to be veridical. You don't want to say this. Instead, you say that there is a bluish-trianglish aspect of my experience that is identical to my content. But I cannot find any bluish-trianglish aspects in my experience.<sup>2</sup> However hard I look, all I can find is *a blue triangle*, not *something mental and bluish-trianglish*. In a way, your view seems to face a variant of the inventory problem: it needs peculiar "aspects" that just cannot be found.

M: You can find the aspects introspectively. They are just phenomenal characters—you simply fail to recognize them for what they are.

A: Why does the blue triangle seem to be *out there* if it is just a complex phenomenal character, which is *in here*?

M: Your "blue triangle" experience represents the content that there is a blue triangle in a particular location. This is *all* a matter of having a phenomenal state with a particular aspect, a bluish-trianglish-located-at-L-ish aspect. That is the deep nature of your intentional state.

A: I see. You are taking everything that I am immediately aware of and effectively relabelling it as an aspect of a phenomenal state.

*(Concretus, who has been silent for some time, perks up.)*

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<sup>1</sup> David: In Mendelovici 2018b, Ch. 9, 2019b you seemed to accept a combinatorial view but maintained that we are ignorant of the relevant modes of combination.

Angela: I did, but I now think that both wholes and parts are fundamental (Mendelovici 2019c).

David: That view must be riddled with difficulties.

Angela: It does face some challenges.

<sup>2</sup> Abstractus is invoking something like the transparency observation (Harman 1990, Moore 1903).

C: Wait a minute! Can we go back to my desire for a beer? I wasn't happy with Abstractus telling me that what I want is an abstract beer—

A: That's an oversimplification of what I said!

C: —but it sounds like you, Mentalicus, are saying something even worse: that I want a *mental* beer!<sup>1</sup>

M: Like Abstractus, I am giving an account of the deep, metaphysical nature of contents: they are mental. But, again like Abstractus, I accept that *what it would take* for your content to be satisfied can be for a concrete state of affairs to obtain. Since there is no concrete beer that can serve as the content of your desire, any viable account must accept that the deep nature of our contents is other than what it appears to be. For Abstractus, it is something abstract. For me, it is something mental.<sup>2</sup>

A: I disagree that contents are other than they appear to be on my view! But let's set that aside. Your last comment brings me to my fourth objection: I'm not sure how contents could be true, satisfied, or otherwise connect us to the external world on your view. It seems all I have are my mental aspects.

M: So far, I have given you only my view of content. I have not said anything about how contents connect us to the world. On my view, a further story needs to be told about what it is for our contents to be true or false, to refer or fail to refer, to be satisfied or fail to be satisfied, and so on.

C: Wait a minute! Aren't contents *just supposed to be* conditions of truth and reference? So a story about truth and reference should just fall out of a story about intentionality.

M: I agree that the notions of truth, reference, veridicality, satisfaction, and so on are related to the notion of intentionality. However, there are really two separate targets of explanation that we might be interested in here. First, we might note that we entertain contents—we think *something*, perceive *something*, and so on. These contents are the “stuff” of thought and experience, what it is that we use to make inferences and guide behaviour, what constitutes our understanding. Call this role that contents are supposed to play the *cognitive role*. Given our definitions of "intentionality" and "content", represented contents play this role by definition.

It also seems plausible to say that the contents we represent impose some conditions that the world would have to satisfy in order for it to appropriately “correspond” to them—in order for these contents to pick something out in the world, to be true, to be accurate, or, more generally, to be *satisfied*. Call this putative role of contents the *alethic* role. Given our definitions of "intentionality" and “content”, represented contents might play this role, but if they do, they do not play it *by definition*.

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<sup>1</sup> See Harman 1990.

<sup>2</sup> David: Mentalicus is appealing to something like the deep nature/superficial character distinction, which I do not accept (see fn. 18).

Angela: Yes, just like Abstractus did (see fn. 18).

David: I don't think so. 😞

The point I want to make is that it is theoretically possible that what plays the cognitive role fails to play the alethic role—that what we entertain does not impose conditions on the world. Indeed, it could be that *nothing* plays the alethic role. It could also be that the same thing plays both roles but that it does so in virtue of distinct features.<sup>1</sup>

C: So I can think Bieber-thoughts without referring to the Bieber himself—and without there even being a fact of the matter as to what it would take for my thoughts to refer to him?

M: Yes, on at least some versions of the Aspect View. By "Bieber-thought" we mean a kind of thought, a kind that we normally describe as being "about Justin Bieber". You can have those kinds of thoughts even if they fail to impose conditions on the world that something would have to satisfy in order for those thoughts to pick it out.

In fact, though, I do think that contents can play the alethic role. But they don't usually do so in virtue of their intrinsic features—they do so in virtue of their relations to other contents that we do or are disposed to entertain. Specifically, we accept certain conditions of truth and reference that we take to apply to our intentional states. These conditions specify what it would take for intentional states of certain types to be satisfied.

For example, you might accept that in order for your perceptual experiences to be veridical, the world must have the features of your experiences but not be mental. In other words, you might accept that in order for your perceptual states to be veridical, the world would have to be qualitatively identical to your experience in all respects other than that of being mental.<sup>2</sup>

C: Could the world really be that way?!

M: Maybe. Maybe not. I am only suggesting that we implicitly accept that this is what the world would have to be like in order for our perceptual experiences to be veridical. But perhaps I am wrong here and we implicitly accept different criteria of truth for perceptual states. Which criteria we accept—if any—is an empirical question. The claim I really want to hold on to is that, for most of our contents, our accepting some such criteria is what would be required for them to have truth conditions.

A: Hmm. You want to explain why our blueness-experiences and Bieber-thoughts refer to blueness or Bieber through stipulations that *we* make regarding what these contents refer to. But how can we stipulate what they refer to without already referring to some things (if not Bieber or blueness, at

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<sup>1</sup> For the distinction between the cognitive and the alethic roles of content, see Mendelovici (2023). See also Gow (forthcoming) for a similar distinction and claim that what plays one role might not play the other.

<sup>2</sup> This "matching" criterion of truth (Mendelovici 2018b, pp. 225–7) is not an implausible first pass at an articulation of the criteria of truth we implicitly accept for perceptual states. But see Bourget (2019b) for critical discussion. A more refined view of the criteria of perceptual truth that we implicitly accept would take into account the fact that we don't take ourselves to be committed to the world matching various perceptual distortions or perspectival effects (see Mendelovici forthcoming-a).

least the criteria by which we allegedly single them out)? I don't see how this view even gets off the ground.<sup>1</sup>

M: I see the force of that worry. It looks like we must say that there are some things you can directly refer to without making any stipulations. But this sounds plausible to me: perhaps you can directly refer to your contents themselves, their features, and other mental items—perhaps you are "acquainted" with them. And then perhaps you can bootstrap your way from there to referring to anything by stipulation.<sup>2</sup>

A: Perhaps this story can work. We'd have to look at the details. But even if it doesn't face internal problems, I'm dissatisfied. I think that what plays the cognitive role is the same thing that plays the alethic role. When I have a blueness-experience, I am presented precisely with the way something would have to be in order for my experience to be true. On your view, I am presented with an aspect of my intentional/phenomenal state, and I must perform an additional cognitive act of accepting some criterion of truth for my perceptual states in order for my perceptual experience to incur any commitments about how the world is. That seems overly complicated and phenomenologically implausible.

M: I grant that in having a perceptual experience, we are not going around entertaining thoughts about how the world is supposed to correspond to our perceptual states. Instead, we just experience our own contents, oblivious to the fact that we are only experiencing aspects of our own minds. Yet once we accept that there is a world beyond our minds, we can distinguish between the world of experience and the world beyond, and we can take our experience to be a stand-in for this world beyond. In order to incur any commitments as to how the world is beyond the mind, we would have to ourselves specify how we take the world to correspond to our mind—in what ways, for example, we take it to be similar to our mental world. Truth and reference is hard work!

But accepting the relevant criteria is not as demanding as you seem to suppose. It need not be explicit or conscious—it might merely be a matter of having implicit, standing, or dispositional states, which might not themselves be a matter of original intentionality but rather *derived* intentionality. So accepting such criteria need not be a further "cognitive act", as you suggest.<sup>3</sup>

Anyways, on your view, Abstractus, contents don't by themselves specify how the world would have to be in order for them to be true, either. On your view, our contents are abstract propositions, which can obtain or fail to obtain. But what it would take for the propositions to be true is not the propositions themselves but rather *that the propositions obtain*. Remember your discussion with Concretus about that desire for a beer? What it would take for that desire to be satisfied is not the

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<sup>1</sup> This worry is, effectively, Putnam's "just more theory" worry internal constraints on truth and reference (1980, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> This, in effect, amounts to a Russellian picture of our connection to the world on which we can directly pick out items we are acquainted with and we can indirectly pick out other items that satisfy further criteria (which for Russell are descriptions) specified in terms of directly referring contents (Russell 1911). Mendelovici (2018b, Appendix H, forthcoming-c, forthcoming-a, MS).

<sup>3</sup> See Mendelovici 2018b.

content of the desire itself—that's just a proposition, a mere abstract object. What it would take for the desire to be satisfied is *that the proposition obtains*. Every view other than the Naive View, which we know can't be made to work, has to say that there is a gap between content and truth conditions. Having truth conditions is a further fact beyond simply representing contents.

A: I agree that a proposition has to obtain (or be a fact) in order to be true. But I still think that contents (which, for me, are propositions) can be their own truth conditions on my view (which makes this view much more straightforward than yours as far as truth conditions go). For a proposition to be true is just for it to be the case, be a fact, or obtain.<sup>1</sup> A content's truth condition is the X such that X is what has to obtain in order for the content to be true. So the proposition/content itself is what needs to obtain in order for the content to be true; contents are their own truth conditions.

M: I am fine with you adding to your picture the claim that what it is for a proposition to be true is for it to obtain. But my claim is that, on your picture, this claim is an additional further fact that doesn't simply fall out of other parts of your picture. To see this, suppose that we grant your claims that (1) what plays the cognitive role of contents is propositions, (2) propositions can obtain or fail to obtain, and (3) the obtaining of a proposition is a (sometimes concrete) fact. All this can be true even if your claim about truth—that the obtaining of propositions makes propositions (and hence the intentional states that represent them) true—is not true. On the resulting picture, what plays the cognitive role of contents is propositions, which can bear this special obtaining relation to other things. The coherence of the truth of (1)–(3) without the truth of your claim that truth amounts to the obtaining of propositions shows that your claim would be a further fact if true. So, in short, on your picture, what plays the cognitive role of contents does not automatically play the alethic role.<sup>2</sup>

A: I don't really agree with—

C: Oh, dear! It seems we have thrown the Bieber out with the bathwater. We started off taking intentionality to give us direct contact with the world, and now we are effectively stuck in the mind, or maybe an abstract Platonic realm, unsure of how to make any kind of epistemically meaningful contact with the world beyond...

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<sup>1</sup> Abstractus is echoing the "identity theory of truth" often ascribed to Moore (1899), Russell (1903), and Frege (1919).

<sup>2</sup> David: I don't agree that (1)–(3) is consistent with it not being the case that a proposition's obtaining is its being true.

Angela: It seems Abstractus—and you—have built into the notion of a proposition that its obtaining is its truth. In effect, you have just stuffed the further fact that Mentalicus is complaining about into the nature of a proposition itself. That is fine. But it is still a further fact.

David: I didn't do this; the notion of truth came pre-packaged like that. It's simply analytic that what you believe (a proposition) is true just in case it's a fact.

Angela: You can imagine a *schmoposition*, which is just like a proposition minus this "pre-packaged" fact. That our contents are not mere schmopositions but also propositions is a further fact.

David: I don't think I can imagine that.

\* \* \*

Angela: All this talk of universals, instantiation, abstracta, obtaining, mental aspects, and so on makes me feel uneasy. I'm worried we are out of our depth.

David: Yeah. I'm afraid that our concepts are not up to the task of understanding intentionality. That's why no view of intentionality seems to work. But that's good news for Abstractus! Maybe the Abstract Contents View only seems mysterious because we don't have the right concepts to characterize the "relationships" between the "concrete" and the "abstract" (notice all the scare quotes).

Angela: There is something of a meta-problem of intentionality here: the problem of explaining why no view of intentionality seems any good.<sup>1</sup> Maybe the best way to solve the meta-problem is by adopting the Aspect View, on which contents are basically just ideas in our minds. If contents were independently existing propositions or the like, we should be able to understand intentionality just by getting ourselves related to the right ones. The fact that we have so much trouble understanding intentionality suggests that we are just juggling our own private ideas in our minds, woefully out of contact with any worldly facts or entities.

Bystander: That reminds me of Kant's (1781) explanation of the antinomies.

Angela: Yes. We're trapped in our phenomenal worlds. That's why nothing really makes sense. The mind can comprehend nothing but itself.

David: Or maybe it's just that the mind *cannot* comprehend itself. Anyway, can we wrap this up? I want a beer.

Angela: A concrete one?

David: Of course.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Chalmers' (2018) meta-problem of consciousness.

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