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Intentionality

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Abstract and Keywords

Intentionality comes from the Latin verb *intendo* meaning to aim, hold out, or stretch. In the context of phenomenology, it refers to consciousness's ability to be of or about things—how consciousness can direct itself toward objects internal (images, memories, etc.) and external (things, relations, and events in the world). Phenomenologists argue that intentionality is a central feature of consciousness. This article discusses phenomenological approaches to intentionality. It considers intentionality's mental, motor, and affective dimensions as developed within the phenomenological tradition. It also considers why phenomenologists think intentionality is integral to subjectivity, and how this qualitative orientation can help illuminate the lived experience of psychopathological conditions, some of which appear to involve subtle disturbances of intentionality.

Keywords: intentionality, embodiment, affectivity, phenomenology, psychopathology, schizophrenia, Brentano, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre

Introduction

Right now, you're probably conscious of many things: for example, the words on the page—or rather the meaning of the words on the page as your eyes skim across them. But you're probably conscious of other things, too: the slight twinge in your back from sitting too long, the faint aroma of coffee in the mug on your desk, or the nagging feeling that you've forgotten to do something. These different things are *objects* of your consciousness.

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This feature of consciousness—its ability to be about things—is what philosophers call “intentionality.” The term comes from the Latin verb *intendo*, which means to aim, hold out, or stretch. In this technical sense, intentionality refers to the way consciousness can stretch out or be directed toward objects internal (images, memories, etc.) and external (things, relations, and events in the world). Conscious mental states are never empty but always *of* or *about* something.

Phenomenologists argue that intentionality is a central feature of consciousness. Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, appropriated the notion from his teacher Franz Brentano, who rejuvenated discussions of intentionality found in medieval philosophers like Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham. And these thinkers appropriated discussions going back to Greek philosophers like Aristotle and Empedocles. We also find sophisticated discussions of intentionality in non-Western traditions—for example, sixth- and seventh-century Indian Buddhist thinkers like Dignāga and Dharmakīrti (Coseru 2012).

I focus here on phenomenological approaches to intentionality since they’re particularly relevant to psychopathology. Not only have phenomenologists spent more time considering intentionality than other philosophical traditions. They’ve also broadened discussions to consider intentionality’s embodied and affective dimensions—themes helpful for understanding the character of some psychopathological conditions. Phenomenologists are concerned not simply with the formal or logical properties of intentionality (cf. Searle 1983) but rather with how intentionality is integral to *subjectivity*. This qualitative orientation can help illuminate the lived experience of psychopathological conditions, some of which appear to involve subtle disturbances of intentionality.

Brentano on Intentionality

Phenomenologists take their characterization of intentionality from Brentano, who looked to construct a “descriptive psychology” (or what he sometimes calls “phenomenology”): a descriptive analysis of experience from the inside (Brentano 1995a). Brentano insists that intentionality must be at the center of this project. Intentionality, he tells us, “is characteristic exclusively of mental phenomena. No physical phenomenon exhibits anything like it. We can, therefore, define mental phenomena by saying that they are those phenomena which contain an object intentionally within themselves” (Brentano 1995b: 68). For Brentano, intentionality not only distinguishes mental from physical phenomena. It also gives individual mental states their distinctive character: “Every mental phenomenon includes something as an object within itself, although they do not all 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 1995b: 68).

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Several points are important. First, Brentano argues that each type of conscious act is constituted as the kind of act it is only via its relation to its intentional object. An act of perception is only such in relation a perceptual object; likewise, other conscious mental states like beliefs, desires, memories, and emotions. Accordingly, to understand the ontology of consciousness, we must investigate the different relations that connect conscious acts with their respective intentional objects. As later phenomenologists will insist, this feature of intentionality illustrates that consciousness is a *relational* phenomenon. We are “through and through compounded of relationships with the world” (Merleau-Ponty 2002: xiv).

Second, looking at how conscious acts relate to their intentional objects allows us to individuate different acts. The same intentional object—a bottle of Belgian beer, say—can be the intentional object of multiple conscious acts. I can *believe* the beer is in my refrigerator, *desire* the beer, and upon opening my refrigerator, visually *perceive* the beer. In each case, the bottle of beer stands in a distinct relation to the act within which it is present *as* intentional object. And this is significant, phenomenologists insist, because these different relations enable us to distinguish the character and structure of different conscious acts within the inventory of all possible mental activity. Intentionality is the tool that enables these taxonomic considerations.

Finally, this way of thinking about intentionality is different from other ways of characterizing mind-world relations as primarily involving *causality*. Intentional relations need not be causal relations; minds can intend non-existent objects like unicorns and Sherlock Holmes—or existent objects beyond our perceptual reach (e.g. distant planets), or even objects that once existed but no longer do (e.g. my deceased grandmother). To be clear, the intentional relation *itself* is, in these cases, very real. I can feel strongly about a fictional literary character, say, or be moved by the memory of my beloved dead grandmother. But neither the literary character nor my beloved grandmother exist as objects in the world. The form of my conscious relation to them will, accordingly, be different than mind-world relations characterized exclusively by appealing to causal descriptions involving existent entities. This is particularly useful in the context of phenomenological psychopathology, which may involve investigating how individuals experientially relate to non-existent individuals, objects, and events.

Beyond Brentano: Mental, Bodily, and Affective Dimensions of Intentionality

Although nearly all major phenomenologists quibble with different parts of Brentano’s analysis—especially his idea that intentional objects are “in” consciousness as mental intermediaries between mind and world—they nevertheless agree that investigations of

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consciousness must begin with intentionality. But phenomenologists also move beyond Brentano in a number of important ways.

To see how this is so, we can note first that phenomenologists insist that minds are irreducibly *embodied* (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008: chapter 7). The things we think and experience—and the way we think and experience them—reflect aspects of the physical structure of our body as well as the things our body can do. So intentionality for phenomenologists is rooted in our bodies and agency. This motor dimension has to be part of a full picture of intentionality.

Additionally, phenomenologists argue that we don't just think thoughts or perceive things. We *feel feelings*. And these feelings— affective phenomena like emotions, moods, and bodily states—play an important role in shaping how the world and other people show up for us, experientially (Colombetti 2014). Feelings are an essential part of the way we are intentionally open and responsive to our world.

Phenomenologists thus move beyond Brentano by developing a multi-dimensional approach to intentionality that respects not only its mental character but also its embodied and affective dimensions. Next, I will consider these three dimensions of intentionality—*mental intentionality*, *motor intentionality*, and *affective intentionality*—in turn.¹ To be clear: from a phenomenological perspective, these dimensions are interrelated. Intentionality is an integrative achievement not of minds, brains, or bodies but of *persons*—subjects open and responsive to physical and social environments. So, while we can make a conceptual distinction between these different dimensions to clarify intentionality's overall structure—as well as differentiate various ways intentionality that becomes disturbed in psychopathology—we should remain mindful that these dimensions are interwoven within the practice of intentionality conceived of as an embodied and situated activity of the whole person.

Mental Intentionality

For Husserl, the structure of intentionality can be analyzed into two components: the object as intended by consciousness (*noema*), and the conscious act that intends the object (*noesis*). In other words, *noema* picks out the object-side of the intentional relation (i.e. *what* is given to consciousness) whereas *noesis* picks out the subject-side (i.e. *how* the “what” is given to consciousness). For example, if I remember the front door of my grandmother's house, the *noema* is the door-as-remembered; it is *what* is made present to consciousness. The *noesis* is the act of remembering; it is *how* the door is made present to consciousness. However, if I visit my grandmother's home, the intentional object will remain the same—her front door—but now the noetic structure through which I intend the front door will be different. It will now be a perceptual act—and the *noesis-noema* structure of that act will vary accordingly. Husserl argues that *all* conscious acts have this

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noetic structure. It is the basic framework for our intentional engagement with the world.²

In addition to its noetic structure, Husserl describes another important feature of mental intentionality. He says intentionality “wants to go to the object itself ... that is, to an intuition that gives the object itself, to an intuition that is in itself the consciousness of having the object itself” (Husserl 2001: 126). He continues: “This directedness is ... a striving, it is from the very beginning ‘driving at’ a satisfaction” (Husserl 2001: 126). There are several points here worthy of consideration.

Perhaps most important is that, for Husserl, intentionality is not a passive state in which the external world presses itself onto a yielding observer but instead a dynamic, temporally extended *activity* (i.e. a kind of “striving” or “driving at satisfaction”). This claim aligns Husserl with contemporary enactive approaches to perception stressing the interdependence of perception and action (e.g. Bower and Gallagher 2013; Hurley 1998; Noë 2004; Thompson 2005).

Consider seeing a red ball. When we see the ball, we don’t actually see the whole thing. We only see the part or “aspect” facing us. Nevertheless, Husserl insists we *experience* the ball as a complete three-dimensional object with density, spatial extension, and unseen parts potentially capable of being seen. These unseen parts are part of the content of our experience, co-given alongside the visible parts: “Of necessity a physical thing can be given only ‘one-sidedly’ ... A physical thing is necessarily given in mere ‘modes of appearance’ in which necessarily a *core of ‘what is actually presented’* is apprehended as being surrounded by a horizon of ‘*co-givenness,*’ which is not *givenness proper,* and of more or less vague *indeterminateness*” (Husserl 1998: 94).

For Husserl, this feature of our experience can be understood by looking at the intentional structure of perception’s “striving” character. The reason unseen parts of the ball are co-given is because we experience the ball as offering possibilities for engagement—what James Gibson terms “affordances” (1966, 1979)—that provide increasingly determinate specifications of the ball’s nature. Put otherwise, the ball affords various interactions (touching, handling, picking up, throwing, etc.) specified both by (1) our possession of kinaesthetic capacities (e.g. the ability to turn our torso, tilt our head, reach for the ball and grasp it) as well as (2) our implicit practical knowledge of how *exercising* these capacities will reliably alter our experience by bringing hidden sides into view. These affordances are part of the noematic content of perception.

Additionally, since intentionality is embodied and situated, Husserl argues that this striving isn’t just going on in our head. It’s a *relational* process through which we stretch outside of ourselves and interact with the world. And the objects partially constitutive of these relations present qualities—again, given as noematic content—affording different kinds of interaction; they establish an object’s *meaning*. Taking seriously the striving

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character of intentionality thus illuminates how perception involves a “constitutive duet” between subject and object (Husserl 2001: 52).

Motor Intentionality

As we’ve seen, Husserl is sensitive to the role embodiment plays in shaping the character and content of intentionality. But Merleau-Ponty takes this idea further. He argues that we are fundamentally animate bodies open and responsive to a meaningful environment; this bodily openness is constitutive of our being-in-the-world. And this openness means that our embodied being is intentional *all the way down*—including prenoetic levels of worldly engagement (Gallagher 2005). For Merleau-Ponty, this is a “deeper” intentionality “beneath the intentionality of representation” (2002: 140 n. 54).

Merleau-Ponty observes that, within the ebb and flow of everyday life, we routinely act—in an organized and purposive way—without conscious reflection, planning, or even full awareness. “Motor intentionality” refers to the integrated suite of skills, capacities, and habits—not all of which are available to consciousness—that enable this unreflective action (Rietveld 2008). It picks out a way of being directed toward the world different than we find within the noetic structure of mental intentionality (Dreyfus 2005; Kelly 2002).

Consider reaching for a coffee mug while reading the newspaper. We don’t first locate the mug—along with different parts of our body—and then think about various movements and postural adjustments needed to carry out our reach. Instead, we simply reach for the mug spontaneously—and crucially, our grasp calibrates itself accordingly. Body and world together organize a coherent and meaningful experience. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “From the outset the grasping movement is magically at its completion; it can begin only by anticipating its end” (2002: 119).

Once again, this dimension of intentionality is rooted in our embodiment. This is because we don’t merely inhabit our bodies as *objects*, as physical things with properties similar to other objects in the world. We also *live through* our bodies onto the world; we experience them from the inside, as *subjects* (Carman 1999). Accordingly, we can unthinkingly grasp the mug because we have an immediate proprioceptive and kinaesthetic sense of where our limbs are in space and what sort of skilful actions are possible *within* that space. This is a tacit pre-reflective bodily awareness operative without deliberate reflection (Legrand 2007). Moreover—and to return to an earlier point—we immediately perceive the mug as *meaningful*: as an artefact affording a range of different interactions determined by the structure of the cup, the context in which we encounter it, and our pre-reflective awareness of our body as an intentional vehicle.

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For Merleau-Ponty, motor intentionality is pervasive throughout everyday life: changing gears while driving, brushing our teeth, tying our shoes, typing on our laptop, stroking our child's cheek while singing a lullaby, playing tennis, practicing guitar scales, lunging for the bottle of wine about to fall off the table, and many other contexts of spontaneous action. In these cases, there is a particular form of bodily understanding of objects and environments—as well as our situatedness within these environments—that allows us to be immediately open and responsive to the things happening around us. For Merleau-Ponty, “[t]hese elucidations enable us clearly to understand motility as basic intentionality. Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of ‘I think that’ but of ‘I can’” (2002: 159).

Affective Intentionality

For phenomenologists, affective states are not internal states hidden away inside brains and bodies. They are embodied and enactive processes that connect us to a shared world and guide our dealings with it (Colombetti and Krueger 2015; Krueger 2014; Krueger and Szanto 2016). Importantly, they also have a revelatory character that shapes how the world shows up for us in our experience (Slaby and Stephan 2008).³

Heidegger, for example, argues that moods aren't simply add-ons providing color to other mental phenomena. Moods are examples of affective phenomena that disclose the world *as being* a certain way. A mood, he says, “has always already disclosed, in every case, Being-in-the-world as a whole, and makes it possible first of all to direct oneself toward something” (Heidegger 1962: 176). For Heidegger, moods set up our encounter with the world by constituting our sense of belonging to it. They reveal the world as a space of practical purposes, values, goals, and activities—a space of *meaning*—and in this sense they are *primordial* phenomena presupposed by the intelligibility of our thoughts, experiences, and actions (Ratcliffe 2008: 48).

Sartre offers a vivid example of the revelatory character of affectivity. After reading a text late into the night, we find it increasingly difficult to focus on the words or their meaning. For Sartre, our eyestrain is first “indicated by objects of the world; i.e., by the book which I read. It is with more difficulty that the words are detached from the undifferentiated ground which they constitute; they may tremble, quiver; their meaning can be derived only with effort ...” (1989: 332). In this case, as focusing on the words becomes more difficult, we shift our attention from the words (experienced as blurry, unstable, or lacking meaning) to the affective quality of the pain around our eyes and temples. For Sartre, this case highlights the Janus-faced intentional structure of affectivity: affective states convey information about self *and* non-self.

This revelatory role of affectivity is supported by different streams of empirical work. Several studies indicate that subjects estimate the grade of an incline to be steeper when wearing a heavy backpack as opposed to not wearing one, or when they feel fatigued as

opposed to refreshed (Proffitt et al. 1995; Proffitt et al. 2001). Even the presence of a supportive friend—actually present or merely imagined—leads subjects to perceive the incline as less steep than when alone (Schnall et al. 2008). The affective support we receive from others shapes how we perceive the world and its affordances. A similar dynamic appears to be at work in the social world. There is evidence, for example, that shared affect is a crucial component of empathy. It allows individuals to pick up on the ways others are responsive to environmental affordances, and in so doing, to share and understand their perspective on the world (Kiverstein 2015).

Without this orienting function of shared affect, however—such as in autistic spectrum disorder (ASD)—individuals struggle to get grip on what others find important in a given situation and have difficulty relating to them. This absence of “affective framing” (Maiese 2015) is one of the reasons people with ASD struggle to comfortably inhabit the common space of the social world.

Disruptions of Intentionality

Phenomenologically informed psychopathologists argue that the generative disorder of schizophrenia is a disturbance of the first-person perspective (Sass and Parnas 2003; see also Henriksen and Nordgaard 2014; Krueger and Henriksen 2016). According to this so-called *ipseity* disturbance model (IDM), this disturbance can include a diminished sense of existing as a bodily subject, a weakened sense of ownership of one’s thoughts and experience, a gradual fragmentation or loss of coherence of the field of awareness, and disturbed self-world, self-other boundaries (Parnas et al. 2005).

These phenomenological descriptions can be enriched by highlighting how various forms of *intentional* disruptions co-occur with or exacerbate disruptions of *ipseity*. For example, Fuchs (2007) draws on Husserl’s (1991) analysis of “inner time consciousness” to relate schizophrenic disorders to the temporal structure of consciousness. For Husserl, the temporal microstructure of consciousness—as intentional—consists of a dynamic self-organizing process comprised of both a *retention* of what I have just seen, heard, or thought, as well as an anticipatory *protention* of what I expect to continue seeing, hearing, or thinking. This temporal synthesis is a tacit background process organizing our experiences into sequences of coherent units.

In schizophrenia, this temporal microstructure of intentional consciousness can become fragmented (Fuchs 2007: 233). Consequently, patients’ capacity to make sense of situations, experiences, and the behavior of others is impaired. In the early stages of psychosis, for instance, experiences such as the loss of one’s train of thought, difficulty following conversations, or difficulty maintaining narrative coherence are common (see also Gallagher 2007). One patient reports: “I’m a good listener but often I’m not really

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taking it in. I nod my head and smile but it's just a lot of jumbled up words to me" (McGhie and Chapman 1961: 106).

This temporal disruption also destabilizes the dynamics of *motor* intentionality. One patient says:

I found recently that I was thinking of myself doing things before I would do them. If I am going to sit down, for example, I have got to think of myself and almost see myself sitting down before I do it. It's the same with other things like washing, eating, and even dressing ...

(McGhie and Chapman 1961: 107)

In these cases, patients take up normally spontaneous, unreflective actions in a deliberate and thoughtful way; each movement is considered in isolation from the others, leading to a "disautomation" compromising their ability to negotiate physical and social environments (Fuchs 2007: 233). Maiese highlights how this disautomation also involves a disruption of *affective* intentionality—a disturbance of what she terms "affective framing"—in that "the body is no longer 'feelingly' integrated into its lived environment" (Maiese 2015: 180). This loss of bodily-affective responsivity results in a diminished sense of ownership, agency, and control. Disturbances of motor and affective intentionality also characterize some of the disruptions of embodiment, spatial cognition, and perception of social and environmental affordances characteristic of conditions like depression and Moebius Syndrome (Krueger and Taylor-Aiken 2016; de Haan et al. 2013; Slaby et al. 2013). In sum, focusing on disruptions of intentionality—along with approaches like IDM—can in this way deepen and enrich our understanding of core disturbances involved in different psychopathologies.

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Notes:

⁽¹⁾ Phenomenologists like Husserl and Merleau-Ponty speak of *act* vs. *operative* intentionality to mark a difference between thinking of intentionality as a feature of conscious acts vs. embodied actions. For simplicity, I adopt more straightforward terminology.

⁽²⁾ How we ought to understand the ontological status of the *noema* continues to be a matter of debate in the literature. See Gallagher 2012: 69-71.

⁽³⁾ For a detailed look at the role of emotions in mental illness, see Stanghellini and Rosfort 2013.

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