

The Problem of Intentionality: A Cardinal Difficulty for Physicalism  
Or  
What Happens to the World When a Mind Shows Up?  
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### I. What is the Socratic Club?

- Content: Issues related to the truth or falsity of the Christian faith
- Method: In the Socratic spirit to follow the argument wherever it leads
- Motivation: “In any fairly large and talkative community such as a university there is always the danger that those who think alike should gravitate together into *coteries* where they will henceforth encounter opposition only in the emasculated form of rumour that the outsiders say thus and thus. The absent are easily refuted, complacent dogmatism thrives, and differences of opinion are embittered by group hostility. Each group hears not the best, but the worst, that the other group can say. In the Socratic all this was changed. Here a man could get the case for Christianity without all the paraphernalia of pietism and the case against it without the irrelevant *sansculottisme* of our common anti-God weeklies. At the very least we helped civilize one another.... Everyone found how little he had known about everyone else.”<sup>1</sup>

### II. What is the problem of intentionality (a brief historical intro)?

- The way in which intentionality is understood, or the aspect of intentionality that is emphasized, focuses the way in which intentionality is problematic.

#### Analytic vs. Continental divide:

- Phenomenology: explain the essential structures of intentionality; how does objectivity arise from subjectivity?
- Analytic: intentionality is mark of mental; how can we explain, or incorporate, intentional mental states into a physicalist account of the world?
- Why a *physicalist* account of the world? “These days we’re all materialists for much the reason that Churchill gave for being a democrat: the alternatives seem even worse. Correspondingly, there’s a new research agenda: to reconcile our materialism with the psychological facts; to explain how minds qua material objects could have the properties they do.” (Jerry Fodor)

### III. Why is intentionality a problem for physicalism?

#### 1. What is Physicalism?

- Physicalism: the view that reality, or at any rate the domain of concrete particulars, properties, and relations, is of a piece with the world investigate by the physical sciences.<sup>2</sup>
- “Human beings, I assume, are part of the natural order. They are physical objects whose mental capacities and dispositions—specifically their representational capacities—need to be explained in terms of natural relations between natural objects and systems of natural objects.”<sup>3</sup> (By “natural” Stalnaker means “physical”)
- “A materialist confronts the task of explaining, or explaining away, this intentional feature of cognitive states. Some account must be given of how a purely physical system could occupy states

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, “The Founding of the Oxford Socratic Club,” in *God in the Dock*.

<sup>2</sup> John Haldane, “Naturalism and The Problem of Intentionality,” *Inquiry* 32 (1989): 306.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Stalnaker, *Inquiry* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1984), p. x.

having a content of this sort. Or, failing this, some explanation must be given of why we systematically delude ourselves into thinking that we occupy states of this sort.”<sup>4</sup>

## 2. What is intentionality?

- “The feature by which our mental states are directed at, or about, or refer to, or are of objects and states of affairs in the world other than themselves.” (John Searle) E.g., beliefs, desires, hopes, fears, loves, hates, etc.
- Brentano’s problem, according to Haldane: the “aboutness” of thought involves two components: content and reference.<sup>5</sup>

## 3. Why is intentionality a problem for physicalism?

- “For various familiar reasons, intentional or representational relations seem unlike the relations holding between things and events in the natural world: causal interactions, spatiotemporal relations, various notions of similarity and difference. One can, it seems, picture, describe, or think about such things as gods and golden mountains even if they do not exist.... Some philosophers have used these distinctive features of intentional relations to argue that they are irreducible to natural relations. From this conclusion it is argued that mental phenomena cannot be a species of natural phenomena. Any account of thinking things as natural objects in the material world, these philosophers argue, is bound to leave something out.”<sup>6</sup>
- According to Haldane, what must get left out of physicalist descriptions of human psychological phenomena are particular aspects of intentional states.
- Haldane’s argument:
  1. Intrinsically intentional states exist.
  2. Descriptions of intentional states must be given in non-extensional language because they involve modes of presentation, representations, and/or aspectual shapes.
  3. Physicalism must explain and describe all phenomena using only physical relations between physical objects. This type of description, at least in principle, must use extensional language only.
  4. No extensional statement can entail a non-extensional one.
  5. Therefore, the description that physicalism can give of the world cannot include the description of intentional phenomena.
  6. And since cognitive states are intrinsically intentional.
  7. Therefore, the description that physicalism can give of the world cannot include cognitive states in general.
- Cognitive state: *intrinsically* contentful state, i.e., if in being in such a state one is *ipso facto* apprised of some representational element.<sup>7</sup> Further, “Intentionality is characteristic of all cognitive activity.”<sup>8</sup> (Intrinsic as opposed to taking some intentional stance à la Dennett)

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<sup>4</sup> Fred Dretske, “The Intentionality of Cognitive States,” in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. V, eds. Peter French et al., (Minneapolis, MN.: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), p. 282.

<sup>5</sup> See John Haldane, “Brentano’s Problem,” *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 34 (1989): 1-32.

<sup>6</sup> Stalnaker, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Haldane, “Problem of Intentionality,” p. 307.

<sup>8</sup> Haldane, “Problem of Intentionality,” p. 308.

### Information vs. Intentional:

- Informational state: causal consequences of systematic physical reactions to environmental features, e.g., the fluctuating temperature in a room. Descriptions of these states are extensional.
- Intentional state: “aboutness” of thought that has both content and reference, e.g., the *belief* that the temperature in a room systematically varies. Descriptions of these states are non-extensional.

### Extension vs. Intension:

- Extension: What a predicate, name, or sentence picks out. There are two tests for extensionality: existential generalization and substitution. For example, if we take it that “Superman can fly” is true, then we can infer that Superman exists (existential generalization). Further, terms with the same extension can be logically interchanged without changing the truth-value of a statement (substitution). For instance, if Clark Kent=Superman, then “Clark Kent can fly” is also true.

• Intension (An unfortunate bit of terminology so most often I will use “non-extensional” instead): Various understood as the meaning by which the extension is determined, or the function that determines the set of things in the extension, or, in terms of sentences, the thought expressed by the sentence. Sentences of this kind fail one, or both, of the tests for extensionality. E.g., “Lois Lane believes that superman can fly.” It is not true to say, “Lois Lane believes that Clark Kent can fly” even though Clark Kent=Superman, i.e., they have the same extension. Further, from Lois Lane’s *belief* we cannot infer that Superman exists.

• Intentional states involve reference, representation, and conceptual content. As a result, ascriptions of intentional states create non-extensional contexts because “content-ascriptions must be sensitive to the cognitive modes of presentation through which the world is experienced.”<sup>9</sup>

• “Whenever we perceive anything or think about anything, we always do so under some aspects and not others. These aspectual features are essential to the intentional state; they are part of what make it the mental state that it is.”<sup>10</sup> (aspectual shape)

• Haldane’s conclusion: There is a radical discontinuity between intentional psychology and the natural sciences because of the non-extensionality of the former.

## **IV. What is a physicalist to do?**

• Stalnaker’s project: to give some examples of situations that are non-intentional, non-extensional yet clearly physical. If this can be shown, then a strategy for solving the non-extensionality of intentional contexts can be seen, or at least envisioned.

### Examples:

1. Need for such-and-such to be the case, e.g., a plant’s need for particular states of affairs to obtain in order to survive
2. Tendency-to-bring-it-about (Tendency toward equilibrium), e.g., a thermostat.
3. Tendency to correlate with environmental conditions and thus represent those conditions, e.g., the growth rings on a tree, or a thermometer. Stalnaker takes this example to be an example of representation, albeit not mental representation or intentionality, but close to it.

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<sup>9</sup> Haldane, “Problem of Intentionality,” p. 309.

<sup>10</sup> John Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1992), p. 156-57.

- The new philosophical riddle: if a tree shows its rings in the forest, and there is no mind around, does it represent its age?

- Does this work?

## V. Some concluding possibilities

What Happens to the World When a Mind Shows Up?

- Intentional states arise/emerge/are created and they involve a family of related notions:

- The world gets represented

- The world gets presented under different modes

- The world now has aspectual shape

- The world gets taken as such-and-such

1. Haldane is right: physicalism as commonly understood is not a complete theory of the human person

a. Abandon physicalism as commonly understood for something else:

i. And not substance dualism either

ii. Haldane has in mind a return to something like Aristotelian form and is willing to call his view naturalism as understood in this way. Could this provide the way out?

iii. John “I’m-not-a-physicalist” Searle: Haldane is right to some extent in that intentional states cannot be described by, replaced with, or reduced to neurophysiological facts. Physical, extensional descriptions will not really be “of” intentional states even though the intentional state is caused by the neurophysiology. A true description of the intentional state takes place at a “higher” level. Does this make sense?

iv. Other options?

b. Physicalism as is commonly understood is still true: we have intentional states but we cannot describe them. [It is not clear, however, what it would mean for a physicalist to admit that intentional states exist if we cannot describe them.]

2. Haldane is wrong:

a. Physicalism can still account for intentional descriptions we’re just not sure how yet. Possibly strategies like Stalnaker’s will end up working out, contra premise 3 or 4, or both.

b. We do not have intentional states, contra premise 1 (eliminativism)

c. Other options?