Chapter 1

THE NATURE OF INTENTIONAL STATES

I. INTENTIONALITY AS DIRECTEDNESS

As a preliminary formulation we might say: Intentionality is that property of many mental states and events by which they are directed at or about or of objects and states of affairs in the world. If, for example, I have a belief, it must be a belief that such and such is the case; if I have a fear, it must be a fear of something or that something will occur; if I have a desire, it must be a desire to do something or that something should happen or be the case; if I have an intention, it must be an intention to do something. And so on through a large number of other cases. I follow a long philosophical tradition in calling this feature of directedness or aboutness “Intentionality”, but in many respects the term is misleading and the tradition something of a mess, so at the very beginning I want to make it clear how I intend to use the term and in so doing to dissociate myself from certain features of the tradition.

First, on my account only some, not all, mental states and events have Intentionality. Beliefs, fears, hopes, and desires are Intentional; but there are forms of nervousness, elation, and undirected anxiety that are not Intentional. A clue to this distinction is provided by the constraints on how these states are reported. If I tell you I have a belief or a desire, it always makes sense for you to ask, “What is it exactly that you believe?” or “What is it that you desire?”; and it won’t do for me to say, “Oh I just have a belief and a desire without believing anything or desiring anything”. My beliefs and desires must always be about something. But my nervousness and undirected anxiety need not in that way be about anything. Such states are characteristically accompanied by beliefs and desires, but undirected states are not identical with beliefs or desires. On my account if a state S is Intentional then there must be
The nature of Intentional states

an answer to such questions as: What is S about? What is S of? What is it an S that? Some types of mental states have instances which are Intentional and other instances which are not. For example, just as there are forms of elation, depression and anxiety where one is simply elated, depressed, or anxious without being elated, depressed, or anxious about anything, so, also, there are forms of these states where one is elated that such and such has occurred or depressed and anxious at the prospect of such and such. Undirected anxiety, depression, and elation are not Intentional, the directed cases are Intentional.

Second, Intentionality is not the same as consciousness. Many conscious states are not Intentional, e.g., a sudden sense of elation, and many Intentional states are not conscious, e.g., I have many beliefs that I am not thinking about at present and I may never have thought of. For example, I believe that my paternal grandfather spent his entire life inside the continental United States but until this moment I never consciously formulated or considered that belief. Such unconscious beliefs, by the way, need not be instances of any kind of repression, Freudian or otherwise; they are just beliefs one has that one normally doesn’t think about. In defense of the view that there is an identity between consciousness and Intentionality it is sometimes said that all consciousness is consciousness of, that whenever one is conscious there is always something that one is conscious of. But this account of consciousness blurs a crucial distinction: when I have a conscious experience of anxiety, there is indeed something my experience is an experience of, namely anxiety, but this sense of “of” is quite different from the “of” of Intentionality, which occurs, for example, in the statement that I have a conscious fear of snakes; for in the case of anxiety, the experience of anxiety and the anxiety are identical; but the fear of snakes is not identical with snakes. It is characteristic of Intentional states, as I use the notion, that there is a distinction between the state and what the state is directed at or about or of (though this does not exclude the possibility of self-referential forms of Intentionality – as we will see in Chapters 2 and 3). On my account the “of” in the expression “the experience of anxiety” cannot be the “of” of Intentionality because the experience and the anxiety are identical. I will have more to say about conscious forms of Intentionality later; my aim now is just to
make clear that, as I use the term, the class of conscious states and
the class of Intentional mental states overlap but they are not
identical, nor is one included in the other.

Third, intending and intentions are just one form of Inten-
tionality among others, they have no special status. The obvious
pun on “Intentionality” and “intention” suggests that intentions
in the ordinary sense have some special role in the theory of
Intentionality; but on my account intending to do something is
just one form of Intentionality along with belief, hope, fear, desire,
and lots of others; and I do not mean to suggest that because, for
example, beliefs are Intentional they somehow contain the notion
of intention or they intend something or someone who has a belief
must thereby intend to do something about it. In order to keep this
distinction completely clear I will capitalize the technical sense of
“Intentional” and “Intentionality”. Intentionality is directedness;
intending to do something is just one kind of Intentionality among
others.

Related to the pun on “intentional” and “Intentional” are some
other common confusions. Some authors describe beliefs, fears,
hopes, and desires as “mental acts”, but this is at best false and at
worst hopelessly confused. Drinking beer and writing books can
be described as acts or actions or even activities, and doing
arithmetic in your head or forming mental images of the Golden
Gate Bridge are mental acts; but believing, hoping, fearing, and
desiring are not acts nor mental acts at all. Acts are things one does,
but there is no answer to the question, “What are you now
doing?” which goes, “I am now believing it will rain”, or “hoping
that taxes will be lowered”, or “fearing a fall in the interest rate”,
or “desiring to go to the movies”. The Intentional states and
events we will be considering are precisely that: states and events;
they are not mental acts, though I will have something to say about
what are properly called mental acts in Chapter 3.

It is equally confused to think of, for example, beliefs and desires
as somehow intending something. Beliefs and desires are Inten-
tional states, but they do not intend anything. On my account
“Intentionality” and “Intentional” will occur in these noun and
adjective forms, and I will speak of certain mental states and events
as having Intentionality or as being Intentional, but there is no
sense attaching to any corresponding verb.
The nature of Intentional states

Here are a few examples of states that can be Intentional states: belief, fear, hope, desire, love, hate, aversion, liking, disliking, doubting, wondering whether, joy, elation, depression, anxiety, pride, remorse, sorrow, grief, guilt, rejoicing, irritation, puzzlement, acceptance, forgiveness, hostility, affection, expectation, anger, admiration, contempt, respect, indignation, intention, wishing, wanting, imagining, fantasy, shame, lust, disgust, animosity, terror, pleasure, abhorrence, aspiration, amusement, and disappointment.

It is characteristic of the members of this set that they either are essentially directed as in the case of love, hate, belief, and desire or at least they can be directed as in the case of depression and elation. This set raises a rather large number of questions. For example, how can we classify its members, and what are the relations between the members? But the question I now want to concentrate on is this: What exactly is the relation between Intentional states and the objects and states of affairs that they are in some sense about or directed at? What kind of a relation is named by “Intentionality” anyhow and how can we explain Intentionality without using metaphors like “directed”?

Notice that Intentionality cannot be an ordinary relation like sitting on top of something or hitting it with one’s fist because for a large number of Intentional states I can be in the Intentional state without the object or state of affairs that the Intentional state is “directed at” even existing. I can hope that it is raining even if it isn’t raining and I can believe that the King of France is bald even if there is no such person as the King of France.

II. INTENTIONALITY AS REPRESENTATION: THE SPEECH ACT MODEL

In this section I want to explore some of the connections between Intentional states and speech acts in order to answer the question, “What is the relationship between the Intentional state and the object or state of affairs that it is in some sense directed at?” To anticipate a bit, the answer that I am going to propose to that question is quite simple: Intentional states represent objects and states of affairs in the same sense of “represent” that speech acts represent objects and states of affairs (even though, as we will see in
The nature of Intentional states

Chapter 6, speech acts have a derived form of Intentionality and thus represent in a different manner from Intentional states, which have an intrinsic form of Intentionality. We already have fairly clear intuitions about how statements represent their truth conditions, about how promises represent their fulfillment conditions, about how orders represent the conditions of their obedience, and about how in the utterance of a referring expression the speaker refers to an object; indeed, we even have something of a theory about these various types of speech acts; and I am going to tap this prior knowledge to try to explain how and in what sense Intentional states are also representations.

There is one possible misunderstanding I need to block at the start of the investigation. By explaining Intentionality in terms of language I do not mean to imply that Intentionality is essentially and necessarily linguistic. On the contrary it seems to me obvious that infants and many animals that do not in any ordinary sense have a language or perform speech acts nonetheless have Intentional states. Only someone in the grip of a philosophical theory would deny that small babies can literally be said to want milk and that dogs want to be let out or believe that their master is at the door. There are, incidentally, two reasons why we find it irresistible to attribute Intentionality to animals even though they do not have a language. First, we can see that the causal basis of the animal’s Intentionality is very much like our own, e.g., these are the dog’s eyes, this is his skin, those are his ears, etc. Second, we can’t make sense of his behavior otherwise. In my effort to explain Intentionality in terms of language I am using our prior knowledge of language as a heuristic device for explanatory purposes. Once I have tried to make clear the nature of Intentionality I will argue (in Chapter 6) that the relation of logical dependence is precisely the reverse. Language is derived from Intentionality and not conversely. The direction of pedagogy is to explain Intentionality in terms of language; the direction of logical analysis is to explain language in terms of Intentionality.

There are at least the following four points of similarity and connection between Intentional states and speech acts.

1. The distinction between propositional content and illocutionary force, a distinction familiar within the theory of speech acts, carries over to Intentional states. Just as I can order you to
The nature of Intentional states

leave the room, predict that you will leave the room, and suggest that you will leave the room, so I can believe that you will leave the room, fear that you will leave the room, want you to leave the room, and hope that you will leave the room. In the first class of cases, the speech act cases, there is an obvious distinction between the propositional content that you will leave the room and the illocutionary force with which that propositional content is presented in the speech act. But equally in the second class of cases, the Intentional states, there is a distinction between the representative content that you will leave the room, and the psychological mode, whether belief or fear or hope or whatever, in which one has that representative content. It is customary within the theory of speech acts to present this distinction in the form “F(p)”, where the “F” marks the illocutionary force and the “p” the propositional content. Within the theory of Intentional states we will similarly need to distinguish between the representative content and the psychological mode or manner in which one has that representative content. We will symbolize this as “S(r)”, where the “S” marks the psychological mode and the “r” the representative content.

It would perhaps be better to confine the term “propositional content” to those states that are realized linguistically, and use the terms “representative content” or “Intentional content” as more general terms to include both linguistically realized Intentional states and those that are not realized in language. But as we also need to distinguish between those states such as belief whose content must always be expressible as a whole proposition and those such as love and hate whose content need not be a whole proposition, I will continue to use also the notion of propositional content for Intentional states, to mark those states that take entire propositions as contents, whether or not the state is realized linguistically. I will use the notations of speech act theory in representing the content of an Intentional state inside parentheses and the form or mode in which the agent has that content outside. Thus, for example, if a man loves Sally and believes it is raining his two Intentional states are representable as

Love (Sally)
Believe (It is raining).
The nature of Intentional states

Most of the analyses in this book will be about states which have whole propositional contents, the so-called propositional attitudes. But it is important to emphasize that not all Intentional states have an entire proposition as Intentional content, though by definition all Intentional states have at least some representative content, whether a whole proposition or not; and indeed this condition is stronger for Intentional states than for speech acts, since some (very few) expressive speech acts do not have any content, e.g., “Ouch!”,” “Hello”, “Goodbye”.

2. The distinction between different directions of fit, also familiar from the theory of speech acts,¹ will carry over to Intentional states. The members of the assertive class of speech acts – statements, descriptions, assertions, etc. – are supposed in some way to match an independently existing world; and to the extent that they do or fail to do that we say they are true or false. But the members of the directive class of speech acts – orders, commands, requests, etc. – and the members of the commissive class – promises, vows, pledges, etc. – are not supposed to match an independently existing reality but rather are supposed to bring about changes in the world so that the world matches the propositional content of the speech act; and to the extent that they do or fail to do that, we do not say they are true or false but rather such things as that they are obeyed or disobeyed, fulfilled, complied with, kept or broken. I mark this distinction by saying that the assertive class has the word-to-world direction of fit and the commissive and directive classes have the world-to-word direction of fit. If the statement is not true, it is the statement which is at fault, not the world; if the order is disobeyed or the promise broken it is not the order or promise which is at fault, but the world in the person of the disobeyer of the order or the breaker of the promise. Intuitively we might say the idea of direction of fit is that of responsibility for fitting. If the statement is false, it is the fault of the statement (word-to-world direction of fit). If the promise is broken, it is the fault of the promiser (world-to-word direction of fit). There are also null cases in which there is no

The nature of Intentional states

direction of fit. If I apologize for insulting you or congratulate you on winning the prize, then though I do indeed presuppose the truth of the expressed proposition, that I insulted you, that you won the prize, the point of the speech act is not to assert these propositions nor to order that the acts they name be carried out; rather, the point is to express my sorrow or my pleasure about the state of affairs specified in the propositional content, the truth of which I presuppose.\(^2\) Now something very much like these distinctions carries over to Intentional states. If my beliefs turn out to be wrong, it is my beliefs and not the world which is at fault, as is shown by the fact that I can correct the situation simply by changing my beliefs. It is the responsibility of the belief, so to speak, to match the world, and where the match fails I repair the situation by changing the belief. But if I fail to carry out my intentions or if my desires are unfulfilled I cannot in that way correct the situation by simply changing the intention or desire. In these cases it is, so to speak, the fault of the world if it fails to match the intention or the desire, and I cannot fix things up by saying it was a mistaken intention or desire in a way that I can fix things up by saying it was a mistaken belief. Beliefs like statements can be true or false, and we might say they have the “mind-to-world” direction of fit. Desires and intentions, on the other hand, cannot be true or false, but can be complied with, fulfilled, or carried out, and we might say that they have the “world-to-mind” direction of fit. Furthermore there are also Intentional states that have the null direction of fit. If I am sorry that I insulted you or pleased that you won the prize, then, though my sorrow contains a belief that I insulted you and a wish that I hadn’t insulted you and my pleasure contains a belief that you won the prize and a wish that you won the prize, my sorrow and pleasure can’t be true or false in the way that my beliefs can, nor fulfilled in the way my desires can. My sorrow and pleasure may be appropriate or inappropriate depending on whether or not the mind-to-world direction of fit of the

\(^2\) Since fitting is a symmetrical relationship it might seem puzzling that there can be different directions of fit. If \(a \text{ fits } b, b \text{ fits } a\). Perhaps it will alleviate this worry to consider an uncontroversial nonlinguistic case: If Cinderella goes into a shoe store to buy a new pair of shoes, she takes her foot size as given and seeks shoes to fit (shoe-to-foot direction of fit). But when the prince seeks the owner of the shoe, he takes the shoe as given and seeks a foot to fit the shoe (foot-to-shoe direction of fit).
The nature of Intentional states

belief is really satisfied, but my sorrow and pleasure don’t in that way have any direction of fit. I will have more to say about these complex Intentional states later.

A third connection between Intentional states and speech acts is that, in the performance of each illocutionary act with a propositional content, we express a certain Intentional state with that propositional content, and that Intentional state is the sincerity condition of that type of speech act. Thus, for example, if I make the statement that \( p \), I express a belief that \( p \). If I make a promise to do \( A \), I express an intention to do \( A \). If I give an order to you to do \( A \), I express a wish or a desire that you should do \( A \). If I apologize for doing something, I express sorrow for doing that thing. If I congratulate you on something, I express pleasure or satisfaction about that something. All of these connections, between illocutionary acts and expressed Intentional sincerity conditions of the speech acts are internal; that is, the expressed Intentional state is not just an accompaniment of the performance of the speech act. The performance of the speech act is necessarily an expression of the corresponding Intentional state, as is shown by a generalization of Moore’s paradox. You can’t say, “It’s snowing but I don’t believe it’s snowing”, “I order you to stop smoking but I don’t want you to stop smoking”, “I apologize for insulting you, but I am not sorry that I insulted you”, “Congratulations on winning the prize, but I am not glad that you won the prize”, and so on. All of these sound odd for the same reason. The performance of the speech act is eo ipso an expression of the corresponding Intentional state; and, consequently, it is logically odd, though not self-contradictory, to perform the speech act and deny the presence of the corresponding Intentional state.\(^3\)

Now to say that the Intentional state which constitutes the sincerity condition is expressed in the performance of the speech act is not to say that one always has to have the Intentional state that one expresses. It is always possible to lie or otherwise perform

---

\(^3\) The exceptions that one can construct to this principle are cases where one dissociates oneself from one’s speech act, as in, e.g., “It is my duty to inform you that \( p \), but I don’t really believe that \( p \)” or “I order you to attack those fortifications, but I don’t really want you to do it”. In such cases it is as if one were mouthing a speech act on someone else’s behalf. The speaker utters the sentence but dissociates himself from the commitments of the utterance.
The nature of Intentional states

an insincere speech act. But a lie or other insincere speech act consists in performing a speech act, and thereby expressing an Intentional state, where one does not have the Intentional state that one expresses. Notice that the parallelism between illocutionary acts and their expressed Intentional sincerity conditions is remarkably close: in general, the direction of fit of the illocutionary act and that of the sincerity condition is the same, and in those cases where the illocutionary act has no direction of fit the truth of the propositional content is presupposed, and the corresponding Intentional state contains a belief. For example, if I apologize for stepping on your cat, I express remorse for stepping on your cat. Neither the apology nor the remorse has a direction of fit, but the apology presupposes the truth of the proposition that I stepped on your cat, and the remorse contains a belief that I stepped on your cat.

4. The notion of conditions of satisfaction applies quite generally to both speech acts and Intentional states in cases where there is a direction of fit. We say, for example, that a statement is true or false, that an order is obeyed or disobeyed, that a promise is kept or broken. In each of these we ascribe success or failure of the illocutionary act to match reality in the particular direction of fit provided by the illocutionary point. To have an expression, we might label all of these conditions “conditions of satisfaction” or “conditions of success”. So we will say that a statement is satisfied if and only if it is true, an order is satisfied if and only if it is obeyed, a promise is satisfied if and only if it is kept, and so on. Now, this notion of satisfaction clearly applies to Intentional states as well. My belief will be satisfied if and only if things are as I believe them to be, my desires will be satisfied if and only if they are fulfilled, my intentions will be satisfied if and only if they are carried out. That is, the notion of satisfaction seems to be intuitively natural to both speech acts and Intentional states and to apply quite generally, wherever there is a direction of fit.4

What is crucially important to see is that for every speech act that has a direction of fit the speech act will be satisfied if and only if the expressed psychological state is satisfied, and the conditions of satisfaction of

4 There are some interesting puzzling cases like doubting that $p$ or wondering whether $p$. Shall we say that my doubt that $p$ is satisfied if $p$? Or if not $p$? Or what?