**John Searle – Intentionality**  
*(Article from Guttenplan’s *A Companion to the Philosophy of Mind*)

**Introduction**

- The concept is originally mediaeval but was reintroduced by Brentano. In its current usage, intentionality refers to that property of the mind whereby it is directed at, or about, or of objects and states of affairs in the world. Searle lists the following mental phenomena as Intentional\(^1\): belief, desire, intention, hope, fear, love, hate, lust, disgust and memory, as well as memory and intentional action.

- Two forms of confusion are common: (1) confusion of Intentionality with intensionality, which Searle discusses later; (2) confusion with intending, which is just one form of intentionality.

**Intentionality and Consciousness**

- Not all intentional states are conscious and not all forms of consciousness are intentional. While many beliefs are conscious and many fears Intentional, I can believe something unconsciously and can have an attack of anxiety with no object. Intentionality and consciousness overlap, but are not coextensive.

**The Irreducibility of Intentionality**

- There have been attempts to eliminate or analyse away Intentionality in terms of simpler notions. (1) Behaviourists felt that beliefs or desires were states in which one was disposed to behave in certain ways in response to certain stimuli. (2) Functionalists try to analyse Intentionality in terms of causal relations; for instance, a belief is a certain functional state caused by external stimuli and which, together with other states such as desires, causes certain forms of external behaviour. (3) Computer Functionalists – proponents of Strong AI - identify Intentional states with computational states, where being in a mental state just is being in a certain state of a computer program. The mind is construed as a computer program running on the wetware of the brain; mind/brain being analogous to program/hardware.

- Searle thinks these attempts fail because they try to reduce Intentionality to something else. Anyone who recognises Intentionality as a genuine phenomenon, is committed to rejecting any eliminative or reductive account since they deny that the phenomenon exists as a genuine feature of the world.

- This discussion tries to explore the logical properties of Intentional states and takes their existence for granted.

**The Structure of Intentional States**

- Searle now discusses what is meant by Intentional states being directed at, being about or of states of affairs in the world, especially since what the state is about – eg. Santa Claus – may not exist. This is where Searle brings in Speech Acts, as the simplest way of explaining Intentional states. Searle claims that Intentional states

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\(^1\) In his book *Intentionality*, Searle always capitalises *Intentional* to distinguish it from intentional.
and speech acts have parallel structures because every speech act is the expression of the corresponding intentional state. All statements are expressions of belief, all promises expressions of intention. Searle claims that the relationship holds even where the speaker is insincere and doesn’t have the expressed belief or intention.

- Searle now gives three examples of the structural similarities between speech acts and intentional states:
  1. Distinction between force / type and propositional content
  2. Distinctions between different directions of fit
  3. The notion of conditions of satisfaction

Speech acts and Intentionality – Type and Propositional Content

- In the theory of speech acts, there is a familiar distinction between *illocutionary force* and *propositional content*. Commands, predictions and questions may express the same propositional content (that you will leave the room) but expressed in speech acts with different illocutionary force. The general structure of the speech act is of the form \( F(p) \). This form carries over exactly to intentional states, \( S(p) \), where \( S \) stands for the psychological mode – belief, hope etc. – but where \( p \) is the same *propositional content*.

Speech acts and Intentionality – Directions of Fit

- Statements are supposed to represent an independently existing reality, and if they do so correctly are said to be true, else false. Orders and such-like are not intended to match an independently-existing reality, but bring that reality into line with the propositional content of the order. Orders are not true or false, but obeyed or disobeyed depending on whether or not behaviour comes to match the propositional content of the order.
- In the first case (statements etc) there is a word \( \rightarrow \) world direction of fit. Truth or falsity – the words for success or failure in this direction of fit – depends on whether the words match the world. In the second sort of case (orders etc) the direction of fit is world \( \rightarrow \) word and the utterance is obeyed (etc) depending on whether the world comes to match the propositional content of the utterance.
- Some utterances have neither of these directions of fit. If I apologise for treading on your foot, the propositional content – that I stepped on your foot – is neither asserted nor uttered in an attempt to get the world to fit it, but is simply taken for granted. Such speech acts have a *null* direction of fit.
- Similarly for Intentional states. Beliefs, like statements, have a mind \( \rightarrow \) world direction of fit, and can be said to be true or false. Desires have the world \( \rightarrow \) mind direction of fit, and are fulfilled or not, but are not true or false. Feeling sorry that I stepped on your foot has no direction of fit.

Speech acts and Intentionality – conditions of satisfaction

- Speech acts (statements, orders, promises …) are satisfied or not depending on whether or not their propositional content comes to match the world with the appropriate direction of fit. The speech act represents its conditions of satisfaction and the illocutionary force represents the direction of fit with which its conditions of satisfaction are represented.
Intentional states have entirely analogous conditions of satisfaction under the appropriate direction of fit. The Intentional state is a representation of its conditions of satisfaction and the psychological mode represents the direction of fit with which the Intentional state fulfils its conditions of satisfaction.

The way Searle explains Intentionality is therefore as representation in the special sense of that word as used in speech acts. Every Intentional state with a direction of fit is a representation of its conditions of satisfaction. Intentional states in general have a propositional content and a psychological mode, which determines the direction of fit with which the Intentional state represents its conditions of satisfaction.

While this is a general explanation, it doesn’t account for two sorts of phenomena. (1) Those with null direction of fit and (2) those without an entire propositional content (such as hating Hitler).

Searle analyses all cases (1) as composites of beliefs and desires, both of which have directions of fit. To be glad that p, one must believe that p and what it to be the case that p, and similarly for being sorry that p.

This suggests to Searle a way of analysing case (2), the emotions, though he can only sketch it here. Love, jealousy and anger (etc) all have features unusual amongst intentional states – we care desperately about them, while many of our beliefs and desires are matters of relative indifference. Searle suggests that emotions are very strong agitated forms of desire. One cares so strongly about one’s emotions because the emotion is itself a form of strong desire, typically caused by a belief which forms part of the emotion. A typical strong emotion will contain a whole package of desires.

Searle thinks that cases (2), where the intentional stance makes reference to a single object but without an entire propositional content, do require the presence of beliefs and desires that do have directions of fit, even though we may not be able fully to analyse the case.

The Intentionality of Perception and Action

While we tend to focus on beliefs and desires, the biologically most basic forms of Intentionality are in perception and intentional action, and these have certain formal features not common to beliefs and desires. Searle considers the respective satisfaction conditions for the perception and the belief that my hand is in front of my face. In the case of perception, the condition of satisfaction is causally self-referential. The perception that there is a hand in front of my face is satisfied if there is a hand in front of my face and it is this that caused my perception. In order for the Intentional content to be satisfied, the fact that satisfies it must cause the very experience whose Intentional content is that fact. This can be expressed in the canonical form S(p) as Visual experience (that there is a hand in front of my face and the fact that there is a hand in front of my face is causing this very experience).

Another difference between perceptions and other Intentional states is the immediacy of the former, which are intrinsically conscious, whereas the latter may be unconscious (eg. beliefs held while asleep).

Memories are half-way between perceptions and beliefs. Like perceptions, memory has the causally self-referential feature, for unless it is caused by the event of which it is a memory, it is not a case of a satisfied memory. However,
memories, unlike perceptions, need not be conscious, since one can be said to remember something while asleep. Belief, memory and perception all have a mind → world direction of fit and memory and perception have world → mind direction of causation.

- Searle now turns his attention to intentional action. Like perceptual experiences, the experiential part of intentional action is causally self-referential (I’m aware of what I’m doing because I’m intentionally doing it) and is typically a conscious mental event. However, the direction of fit of the experience of acting is world → mind (my intention is only carried out if the world comes to match its propositional content) and the direction of causation is mind → world (both the opposite of the case with perception).

- Searle draws another analogy with perception and memory on the one hand and two forms of intention on the other. The first form is the intention with which we perform the act, and the second is that we form prior to performing the act (the premeditation). Both intentions-in-action and prior-intentions are self-referential, but prior-intentions only need not be conscious experiences, as they can be had when asleep.

The Network and the Background

- Intentional states only function in a network of other Intentional states. An intentional action is only conceived in the context of many beliefs, desires and intentions. This fact that one Intentional state only functions in connection with an indefinite number of other Intentional states is known as the Network of Intentionality.

- If we trace back through the network, we end up with a bedrock of mental capacities, abilities and tendencies that are taken for granted or presupposed, but which don’t themselves form part of the Intentional network. Searle gives examples: we presuppose the solidity of objects, the traversability of 3-D space, the persistence of the continents, that most human life goes on hear the surface of the earth; all of which is pre-intentional background to forming the intention of booking a flight, but none of it is a matter of further Intentional contents. The background of Intentionality consists in the various skills and competencies one has for undertaking various physical and social activities (such as walking, buying a ticket, boarding a plane, sitting down, and so on). Where intentional action is concerned, an agent’s abilities rise to the level of the background skill, and for that very reason, says Searle, reach to the bottom of the physical exercise of that skill. Searle considers these points in turn.

- Walking doesn’t require a specific intention for each leg movement; all that’s required is forming the intention to walk, and then doing so, one’s intentionality

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2 I’m not convinced by this. Presumably one deduces that one remembered something when asleep because one remembered when one woke up, and as this was a memory of an event prior to your falling asleep, it must have been in your memory when you were asleep otherwise it wouldn’t have been there when you woke up. However, say on waking up one had a lapse of memory. In that case you couldn’t say you remembered, even though later on you might recall the memory. I suspect an equivocation concerning “remember” here. Remembering is strictly a conscious act, whereas having things (maybe inaccessibly) in memory need not be conscious.

3 While we can have unconscious mental events, can we have unconscious experiences?

4 It is very confusing to have intentional and Intentional in the same context.

5 Again, with a small “i”.

6 And, hopefully, makes some sense!
rising to the level of one’s background ability. Nevertheless, each of the subsidiary voluntary movements that make up the execution of one’s intended act is performed intentionally; while there is no separate intention determining each leg movement, each is intentional. This can come about because the top-level intention\(^7\) invokes the background ability, derives it conditions of satisfaction from the background ability, and consequently governs each of the voluntary movements within the execution of the skill governed by the background ability. While the only intention is to walk, the leg movements are not thereby made unintentional, being intentionally performed as part of the higher-level intentional act.\

**Intentionality-with-a-T and Intensionality-with-an-S**

- Searle claims there is a standard confusion in philosophy to suppose a special connection between Intentionality and intensionality, with some authors claiming they are identical when in fact the two notions are quite distinct. As we’ve seen, (1) Intentionality is that property of the mind by which it is directed at, or is about, things in the world. On the other hand (2) Intensionality is that property whereby sentences fail to satisfy certain tests for extensionality.
- The two most common tests for extensionality are (a) substitutability of identicals (Leibniz’s Law) and (b) existential inference. (a) states that we can substitute into any statement without changing its truth value co-referring expressions. (b) states that any statement containing a referring expression implies the existence of the object referred. Statements that don’t satisfy these conditions are said to be intensional with respect to the test for extensionality. Searle gives examples of beliefs: for (a) substituting the supposedly identical Mr. Howard for Jesse James, doesn’t imply someone believes the same things of both (“the sheriff believes Mr. Howard is an honest man”). For (b), “Billy believes that Santa will come on Christmas Eve” doesn’t mean \(\exists x\)(x will come on Christmas Eve).
- So, what is the connection between Intentionality and intensionality? Sentences that are intensional are about Intentional states. The truth conditions of these intensional sentences do not require that the world be as represented by the original Intentional states, but only that the content of the Intentional state be as represented in the sentences about those Intentional states. Searle analyses things as follows: (i) Intentional states are representations, (ii) the content of the representation can be reported independently of whether or not it is satisfied or the objects purportedly referred to even exist; consequently (iii) the report of the Intentional state doesn’t commit the person making the report\(^8\) to the existence of the objects referred to by the original representation – ie. to existential generalisation; nor (iv) does the report necessarily remain true under substitution of co-referrals – ie. failure of substitutability.
- The explanation for the failure of the tests is that, while the ground-floor Intentional states in the minds of the sheriff and Billy are representational, the reports of their beliefs are representations of representations. The truth of the latter depends not on how things are in the *real* world represented by the original representation (Intentional state) but how they are in the *mental* world of that Intentional representation. So, (a) such a mental representation can be accurately

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\(^7\) Should this be capitalised?

\(^8\) But, presumably the person making (rather than reporting) the statement did?
reported even without the existence of the objects purportedly referred to by the representation, so accounting for the failure of existential generalisation. Also (b) since the expressions occurring in the reports aren’t used to refer to any such objects, but only to the content of a representation, they are not subject to the law of the substitutability of co-referring expressions. The substitution may not preserve the content of the original Intentional state being reported, and hence cannot guarantee sameness of truth value, so accounting for the failure of the substitutability test.

- Hence, Intentionality and intensionality are quite distinct, the only connection being that reports of Intentional states are characteristically intensional reports. However, other sorts of sentences – modals for example – are intensional.

The Intentionality of Meaning

- Searle has so far defined Intentionality only insofar as it applies to mental phenomena – beliefs and desires being intrinsically Intentional. But sentences, symbols, pictures and so on can also represent states of affairs in the world. In such cases, the Intentionality of the mind is imposed on non-mental phenomena, which have only derivative Intentionality – the most important form of which is in language, and is called meaning.

The Background of Intentionality

- This section focuses on Searle’s views on Intentionality that differ from those common in the field.
- In Searle’s view, Intentional states can only function against a background of capacities, abilities, tendencies, dispositions and other causal structures that are not (and could not be) analysed in terms of other Intentional states. This differs from current orthodoxy, which recognises that Intentional states are not atomistic, but function in a holistic network of other Intentional states. Searle seems to accept this, but makes the further point that these further beliefs themselves only operate against the background of abilities, capacities, know-how and suchlike that are not and could not be analysable into further sets of beliefs.
- Searle states that the simplest argument for the Background is the endlessness of the task should we try to trace out the threads of the network of Intentionality. This isn’t simply because we don’t know where to stop, but because each further Intentional state allows for an indefinite range of interpretations unless the correct interpretation is fixed by something other than an Intentional state. Searle gives some of the indefinite list of commonplaces about eating that are background to understanding the sentence “dinner is ready”. The purpose of this is to make the key point that each of these other beliefs (such as that dinner is made of edible material rather than prime numbers) is itself subject to an indefinitely large range of interpretations. This has to stop somewhere, and it does so, says Searle, with my simple ability to cope with the world. He invokes Wittgenstein in support of the view that understanding is fixed by an ungrounded way of acting. We just

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9 This comes from p. 549 of the article Searle, John R.
10 Searle expands this as the determination of conditions of satisfaction: truth conditions in terms of beliefs, and fulfilment in the case of desires and intentions.
11 Searle capitalises Background here and elsewhere.
know what to do, and, in Searle’s view, this includes how to understand, interpret
and apply Intentional states.

- Searle’s thesis of the Background, together with his critique of Cognitive Science,
  has, he says, significant implications for our understanding of human cognition.
  We should not say that humans are everywhere following rules in principle
  inaccessible to consciousness when they exercise their cognitive capacities. Rather,
  we should say that they have a Background structure, which allows them
to cope in certain ways with their environment. This structure is as it is because
the environment is what it is and humans’ relationships to it are what they are.