

10: Intentionality

In thinking about the world, mental states seem to 'reach out' to the world. When I think about my hometown, Berlin, for instance, my thoughts are about that city. My thoughts have intentionality, they are directed at the world. How can we explain this feature of our minds? Present one possible answer to this question, and then go on to formulate a possible objection.

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Intentionality is the power of minds and mental states to be about, to represent, or to stand for, things, properties and states of affairs (Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy). It appears to allow our thoughts to 'reach out' and connect with the world. While intention toward an existing object might be easy to apprehend, intention toward a non-existing object calls for more investigation.

One way to understand intentionality, is that intentionality contains intentional objects in itself, and intentions are directed to it. To understand this, consider the simple act of thinking about your hometown, Berlin. In this instance, Berlin doesn't 'exist' in your thought in a physical sense; rather, it 'inexists' in an intentional manner. To illustrate further, consider a scenario in which you imagine a non-existent unicorn. The unicorn doesn't exist in reality, but it does 'inexist' within the realm of your thought.

This is precisely what Chisholm means, at least as I understand him, by his thesis of intentional inexistence. ¹'Intentional inexistence', explaining how our thoughts reach out to the world or to non-existent entities, is the principle that the object of perception or thought (intentional objects) exists within the act of perceiving or thinking. Indeed, this opposes representationalism, the idea that our thoughts are merely internal representations of external objects.

However, this approach to intentionality invites potential objections. One might argue that when we think about unicorn or Smaug (both fictional character), our thoughts aren't truly reaching out to these non-existing entities. Instead, we are engaging with the concepts or images of these characters formed in our minds based on the descriptions provided by the authors.

For instance, when we think about Smaug, we aren't contemplating the creature itself, but the concept of Smaug as we've understood from Tolkien's work. Thus, these critics could argue that our mental states don't truly exhibit "inexistence"; they are simply reflecting our interpretations of literary descriptions.

Other critics suggest that the view of "Intentional Inexistence" can't explain false beliefs. For example, if I mistakenly believe that the moon is made of green cheese, then according to the "Intentional Inexistence" view, this moon made of green cheese exists in my belief in an "intentionally inexistent" way. However, this seems to conflict with how we normally understand false beliefs, as we generally think that false beliefs are false because the objects they're about aren't as we believe them to be.

However, I still believe that intentionality contains intentional objects in itself, and the objections aren't perfectly valid. For the first objection, it is counterintuitive that intentions are about concepts or descriptions instead of the object itself. If Jack loves Mary, then, it is *Mary* that he loves, not the *mental image* of Mary nor the *psychological concept* of Mary. For the second object, one possible understanding is that false belief happens when the intentional objects existing within the act of thinking of oneself does not comply with the objects inexist in the community's act of thinking, which is what "we believe".

¹ Though in our reading material, Chisholm mainly focuses on raising ways of purely physical languages to characterize intentional phenomenon and refuting these ways, certain parts of his thesis do explain 'Intentional inexistence', that intentionality implies the existence of the objects of thought.