



# **NEW DIRECTIONS IN THE STUDY OF THE MIND**

research project 2015-2017

 UNIVERSITY OF  
CAMBRIDGE



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[newdirectionsproject.com](http://newdirectionsproject.com)

# Seminar 28

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1. Recap: physicalism, intentionality and magic
2. Objects of thought: indeterminate, non-specific, and non-existent
3. Non-existent objects: an introduction

# 1. Recap: physicalism, intentionality and magic

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A dominant question: what makes something the object of your thought?

My claim: there is no reason to ask for a general, metaphysical, reductive answer to this question ...

...unless you are a physicalist

# The appeal to intentionality

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Why are we not allowed to appeal to intentional states in explaining why the ant's work in the sand is not a picture?

Putnam's answer: because we can raise the same questions about intentional states:

“what goes for physical pictures also goes for mental images, and for mental representations in general”

But is this right?

# The assumption

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There is something about the thought that can be identified independently of the question of what its object is — i.e. its intentionality

This is fine if you are a physicalist — it's the brain state etc.  
—but why should a non-physicalist accept it?

# **‘Magic’**

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Putnam says that to reject this assumption is to believe in magic:

“mental representations no more have a necessary connection with what they represent than physical representations do. The contrary supposition is a survival of magical thinking.”

# Magical theories of reference

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If you reject the assumption that there must be some non-intentional way of characterising a thought, then you believe in a 'magical theory of reference'

Putnam 'postulating mysterious powers of mind solves nothing'

# Non-reductive, non-physicalist approaches to intentionality

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- (i) Accept intentionality as a fact — this is not ‘postulation’
- (ii) Is intentionality mysterious? By what standard?
- (iii) One aim of a philosophical theory of intentionality: to remove the sense of mystery from what seems mysterious
- (iv) This is my approach to the problem of non-existence



## 2. Reference and intentionality again

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Standard contrast between fixing reference 'by description' and fixing reference 'directly'

(Remember two senses of 'direct' reference)

Does the same distinction apply to intentionality?

# Eros Corazza on Imogen Dickie (NDPR 2017)

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“The basic idea is that the 'aboutness' of our thoughts is cognitively motivated. For it rests on a notion of cognitive focus, i.e. on the way the thinker focuses her thoughts on a given object. The interpretation developed in the book incorporates both the insights of the causalist picture (roughly, the view that a tokened singular term relates to its referent via a causal chain of reference) and the descriptivist picture (roughly, the view that a tokened singular term is about an object insofar as the latter satisfies the descriptive content the speaker associates to the term she entertains). In brief, some 'aboutness-fixing' is causally driven while some is descriptively driven.”

# Rigid designation and direct reference

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A rigid designator refer to the same object in all possible worlds (in which that object exists) as it does in the actual world

A directly referring expression contributes to the truth-conditions of sentences in which it occurs only by referring to the object it does

# Names and descriptions

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Kripke: names are rigid designators

Some descriptions are rigid designators

All directly referring expressions are rigid designators

No descriptions are directly referring expressions

# How can this distinction apply to thought?

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(1) What sense can we make of a thought-element being (a) rigid; (b) a device of direct reference?

NB Some philosophers (e.g. Papineau, Balog) think thoughts are like words

(2) What sense can we make of a thought 'referring by description'?

# **‘By description’**

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If you think of X by thinking of it as ‘the F’ you are still appealing to unanalysed intentionality: *the ability to think of something as an F*

Thinking by description is still thinking!

# Singular thought: an aside

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I suspect that some philosophers think that the central question about intentionality is the question of *how we can think about particular objects in a 'singular way'*

(This may be what is going on in Imogen Dickie's book)

But this is not the only question

# Donnellan's distinction

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The referential and the attributive ('Reference and Definite Descriptions' *Philosophical Review* 1967)

'The man with champagne in his glass is happy'

What is really going on here?



# Speaker's reference and semantic reference

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Speaker's reference: what a speaker is referring to/aiming to refer to — what they 'have in mind'

Semantic reference: the relation between a word and a thing, as appealed to, e.g., in formal semantics/model theory

# **Intentionality is not semantic reference**

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Semantic reference is a relation between words and things

Some words do not refer to anything ('non-referring terms')

But speakers can refer to, think about, talk about (etc.)  
things that do not exist

## **Reminder: the problem of non-existence**

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- (A) Intentional states are relations between thinkers and intentional objects
- (B) Relations entail the existence of their relata
- (C) Some intentional objects do not exist

### 3. Non-existent objects: an introduction

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Part of the mystery of intentionality: objects of thought can be indeterminate, vague, non-specific, or non-existent

- Trying to pin down an obscure idea in your mind, to find the words for what you think
- ‘Some people are neither bald nor not bald’
- ‘Suppose a student wanted to study Nietzsche...’
- ‘Vulcan does not exist’

# Anscombe on intentional objects

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‘There are three salient things about intention which are relevant for my subject. First, not any true description of what you do describes it as the action you intended... Second, the descriptions under which you intend what you do can be vague, indeterminate.... Third, descriptions under which you intend to do what you may not come true, as when you make a slip of the tongue or pen. You act, but your intended act does not happen.’

‘The Intentionality of Sensation’ (1965)

# Anscombe ctd

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‘the possible non-existence of the object ... is the analogue of the possible non-occurrence of the intended action’

# Non-existent objects

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Whenever someone thinks, they think about something

Or in other words: whenever someone thinks, there is something they think about

Some of the things they think about exist, and some of them do not

There are truths and falsehoods about the non-existent things they think about

And yet the entire world – the real world, reality, the universe, call it what you like – does not contain more than what exists.

# Features of talk about non-existence

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(1) Reference

(2) Quantification

(3) Truth





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