Intentionality

It is not unusual to begin a discussion of Kant with a brief review of some history of philosophy. What is perhaps less usual is to start with a review of (from Kant’s standpoint) a bit of “future history.” I see Kant as contributing to a major conceptual evolution we can identity in the history of modern philosophy. But, I think, the terminology and explanatory moves necessary to fully understand the concept we find evolving do not arrive on the scene until about a hundred years after Kant’s work. Specifically, I think we gain insight into much of what Kant is up to in the *Critique of Pure Reason* if we understand that he is implicitly offering a very different account of the “intentionality” of our conscious experience of the world than we find in his predecessors. And so we must begin by explaining the set of problems that have come to be known as “the problem of intentionality.”

The term finds its modern origins in the work of Austrian philosopher Franz Brentano. In his 1874 *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, he famously writes:

> Every mental phenomenon is characterized by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object, and what we might call ... direction toward an object (which is not to be understood here as meaning a thing), or immanent objectivity. Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself, although they do not do so in the same way. In presentation, something is presented, in judgment something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired and so on.

> This intentional inexistence is characteristic exclusively of mental phenomena. No physical phenomenon exhibits anything like it. We can, therefore, define mental phenomena by saying that they are those phenomena which contain an object intentionally within themselves.

There is a lot in this passage we might discuss, but I will try to be brief. First, there is simply the phenomena itself that Brentano picks out with this term: direction toward an object. Mental states, Brentano notes, are “of” or “about” something. If I am thinking, there is something I am thinking about. If I am hoping, there is something I am hoping for. If I am hallucinating, there is something my hallucination if of. If I am perceiving, there is something I perceive.

So, by the “intentionality” of a mental state or conscious event, we mean that feature of of such states or events in virtue of which they are “of” or “about” something. We might instead speak of the “of-ness,” “about-ness,” or “directionality” of mental states. Using language much closer to Kant’s, we could speak of the “representationality” of conscious experiences.
Brentano believes that intentionality (or, the “intentional inexistence” of an object, which we will come to next) is “the mark of the mental.” That is, all and only mental states have intrinsic intentionality. The claim that all mental states are intentional is the less controversial of the two sides of this biconditional. Try to think of a conscious state that is not of or about anything. Perhaps “religious” experiences such as “cosmic consciousness” might count as counter-examples. I don’t wish to take any stand on these kinds of conscious states. At the very least, a very large class of mental events are, by their very nature, of or about something. It is this class of experiences, I think, that Kant is concerned to explain.

The claim that only mental states are intrinsically intentional is much more controversial. Outside of mental states, we find intentionality primarily in language. Words are of or about things. Brentano recognizes this, of course, but thinks that the intentionality of language is derivative on the intentionality of the thoughts they express. In the mid 20th century, there was a series of correspondences between Wilfrid Sellars and Roderick Chisholm debating the order of dependence. Chisholm argued that language is intentional because it expresses thoughts, which are intentional intrinsically. Sellars argued that the dependence was in the other direction. So, for Chisholm, language is externalized thought, while for Sellars, thinking is internalized language. Once again, I do not wish to take a stand on this issue. Whichever is primary, the “conceptual space” of the problems and possible solutions is largely identical. So, we can explore that conceptual space without worrying about the issue of which (if either?) is fundamental.

More important to our discussion here is Brentano’s claim that mental phenomena are characterized by the “intentional inexistence” of its object. What in the world is “intentional inexistence?”

Whatever Brentano’s own position is, we can begin to see the appeal of some such expression by noting that mental states can be of or about something even though there is nothing (nothing existing) that they are of or about! Ponce de Leon searched for the fountain of youth, even though there was no fountain of youth to search for. We can believe things that are not true, hope for things that never come to pass, and see things that aren’t there. So, when we say that a mental state is intentional, it seems, we are describing something “internal” rather than positing a relation it stands in to some “external” or “extra-mental” object or state of affairs.

Now, I am not a Brentano scholar, but, at least in this passage, it seems as though Brentano is saying that the intentionality of mental phenomena is a matter of there being an object that in some way “exists in” the mental state. If the object of my mental state does not exist “in the world,” then it might seem natural to suggest that where it does “exist” is “in my mind.” And so this is one way to capture what Brentano means by “intentional inexistence.” Mental phenomena can be directed towards an object whether or not the object exists outside the mind because the object exists in the mind.

This would also capture the fact that hallucinations can be phenomenologically indistinguishable from perceptions. I can see the Eiffel Tower, and I can hallucinate the
Eiffel Tower. Both experiences are intentional, but only one is veridical. This seems nicely captured by saying that both are directed towards the same internal object, while only in the later case does this internal object correspond in an appropriate way to some external object. So, on this view, we might capture the claim that mental states are intentional by claiming that there is always some “inner,” or “mental” object that they are immediately of or about, and then restrict veridical experiences to those where this mental object corresponds to some (numerically distinct) other object that it “represents” or “stands for.”

As I said, Brentano brought this topic to the fore in the mid 19th century. It became a fundamental topic in the late 19th and early 20th century for the German philosopher Edmund Husserl. And the question became central again (in certain parts of) 20th century philosophy of mind and philosophy of language. But I think it is fair to say that the philosophical issues were there before Brentano gave a name to them. I think these questions form a central theme in Modern Philosophy, particularly in the works of Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. This theme is sometimes known as the “Theory of Ideas.”

Of the four philosophers just mentioned, Descartes is the lone rationalist. Rationalists, of course, believe that at least some knowledge is possible on the basis of reason alone, without the need or possibility of justification through sense experience. In Descartes, we find this expressed not in a rejection of sense experience, but in the need to use reason to justify the possibility of empirical knowledge against skeptical challenges. The crux of this skeptical challenge stems from the fact that there are no “certain marks” by which to distinguish veridical from non-veridical experience. Given solely what I know on the basis of sense experience, I might be a brain in a vat: I might be deceived by a malicious demon or an inscrutable God into believing in the existence of a world outside of my experience even though no such world exists.

We all know the how Descartes continues: if I am deceived about the existence of a material world, I cannot be deceived about my own existence: if I am deceived, I must exist in order to be deceived. So, Descartes reasons, I can be certain of at least this much: “I am, I exist,” is true whenever I think it or say it. But, more importantly for my purposes here, my certainty does not end with the mere fact of my existence: I know what is “in” my mind. I may not be certain that I see this hand before me, but I can be certain that I at least seem to see it. I am certain, that is, of the idea in my mind. Where I lack certainty regards the existence of some object outside my mind that this idea purports to represent.

So, the problem of skepticism for Descartes seems to be one of justifying our belief that there are objects outside of our minds that correspond to the ideas we find inside our minds. If we now set aside the skeptical questions themselves, we find something very much like the views we earlier attributed to Brentano: mental states all involve an idea or “mental representation” of which we are immediately aware. In some cases, this idea or mental content corresponds to another object it is said to represent. So, to say that all mental phenomena are intentional is to say that mental states all involve an idea of
which we are immediately aware. When this inner object corresponds to the right outer object, our experience is veridical.

My point in this discussion is that, for Descartes, in all conscious mental states we are immediately aware of an idea (or mental content). Descartes, of course, does not explicitly speak of the intentionality of experience. But in his explanation of the senses and the possibility of error, he does say that we can be certain of the idea in our minds, and that mistakes come only in the inferences we make about the causes of those ideas.

Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, of course, are, unlike Descartes, all empiricists. But they all seem to take certain parts of Descartes’ model of conscious states for granted (even though they may argue with the kinds of inferences we can make from it). All of them, that is, take for granted that in any kind of mental state, there is always an idea or mental content of which we are directly and immediately aware. (They differ in the terminology. Hume makes a distinction—which we needn’t go into here—between “ideas” and “impressions,” and so use the term “perceptions” for what the others simply call “ideas.”)

Consider the two following two quotes from Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*: “Before moving on, I must here at the outset ask you to excuse how frequently you will find me using the word ‘idea’ in this book. It seems to be the best word to stand for *whatever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks*; ....”, and, “Whatever the mind perceives in itself—whatever is the immediate object of perception, thought, or understanding—I call an idea; ....” So, for Locke, ideas are the immediate objects of awareness in “perception, thought, or understanding.” I take this to imply that, for Locke, consciousness is always and only of ideas. These ideas may stand in further relations to things outside the mind, but, it seems, consciousness just is the awareness of ideas in our minds.

Something you may note in the above quotes is that Locke is not really defending the claim that we are immediately aware only of mental contents. He seems to take that for granted, and then uses this fact as a way of explaining what he means by the term “idea.” So, he seems to reason, we all know that mental states are the immediate awareness of objects that exist in our minds. What he is doing in these (and other) passages is telling us that when he uses the (unfamiliar) word “idea” what he is talking about are these objects of which we are all already familiar.

So, the model of sense perception (and of mental states generally) we find in Locke is essentially identical to the one we find in Descartes, but without Descartes’ sceptical worries. We might diagram the model we find in each as follows:
Intentionality:
There is always an idea (or mental content) that we are directly aware of. Intentionality is a relation between the mind and an “inner” object.

Veridicality:
An experience is veridical when the idea we immediately experience corresponds to an external object.

In Perception we (indirectly or “mediately”) see an external object by directly or immediately seeing a mental content that correctly represents that external object.

The next thing to note is that both Hume and Berkeley agree with the left side of this diagram. Each, that is, believes that in all mental states, what we are immediately aware of are all and only mental contents. In Berkeley’s *Principles* we find, “Whatever the mind perceives in itself—whatever is the immediate object of perception, thought, or understanding—I call an idea; ....” and in the *Treatise* Hume claims that “nothing is ever really present to the mind except its own perceptions .....” Like Locke, each seems to take this for granted. Where they differ from Locke is in whether or not we are really justified in positing any world outside of these ideas.

Hume’s attack is relatively straight-forward: it is a direct appeal to skepticism. Since we have no direct experience of anything other than our own mental contents, we have no empirical evidence (and hence no evidence at all) for positing anything distinct from these mental contents. Hume is thus a skeptic not only concerning the existence of material substance, but likewise of mental substance.
Berkeley offers many different arguments, not all of them consistent, and not all of them attempting to reach the same conclusion. Some of Berkeley’s arguments follow the same skeptical lines as Hume (though only about material substance—Berkeley seems to accept mental substance in the same uncritical way that Locke accepts material substance). But Berkeley also offers an independent, and far more devastating, criticism of the above picture: Since we are aware only of ideas, and since “thinking” and “conceiving” are forms of awareness, we cannot even conceive of anything distinct from an idea. In terms of the above diagram, we might characterize Berkeley’s claim as saying that the left side of the diagram makes the right side unintelligible. If we can conceive only of ideas, then we cannot conceive of these material objects that are claimed to be distinct from our ideas of them. So, it is not merely that we don’t know for sure that there is such a material world. Rather, we know for sure that there is no such world, as the very concept of it (as something we can conceive of—hence, an idea—that is not an idea) is contradictory. Material substance, says Berkeley, is a “manifest repugnancy.”

So, what has any of this to do with Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason? It is worth noting that in the first published review of the Critique, the charge was made that Kant’s position (“transcendental idealism”) was nothing more than Berkeley’s position (“idealism”). On the standard account of transcendental idealism, Kant’s position ends up looking much like Locke’s, and so, not surprising, looks like it is open to the same sorts of attacks that Hume and Berkeley made against Locke. So, what, exactly, is Kant’s transcendental idealism? In many ways, answering this question will be a primary focus of this class.

Transcendental idealism has been interpreted in many ways, but there is clear agreement on at least a superficial level: transcendental idealism is the view that we know only appearances, and never things in themselves. Given that “things in themselves” are held to exist apart from our experiences of them, and that “appearances” are called, among other things, “mere representations in us,” the comparison with Locke looks fitting. It seems that Kant is claiming that knowledge is limited to mental representations, while nevertheless claiming these representations are appearances “of” independently real things in themselves that we can never know or experience. And so one of the primary responses to Kant has been to suggest that he must give up this unjustified attachment to things in themselves. That is, given that Kant’s view looks structurally similar to Locke’s, it is not surprising that his view (on this interpretation) is open to the same sorts of criticisms as is Locke’s.

I think that these readings of Kant all miss the point of what Kant was really trying to do. Kant’s point was not (like the others we have been discussing here) one about the true nature of the objects of experience (i.e., that they are things-as-they-appear rather than things-as-they-are-in-themselves), but instead one about the true nature of our experiences of objects (that we only know-as-appearing things [in themselves] and do not know-as-they-are-in-themselves things). Kant, that is, is not so much concerned with what we experience, as in how we experience it. His concern is with nothing short
of the conditions of the possibility of consciousness. His claims that consciousness is always consciousness of an object is his way of saying that consciousness is always intentional.

To sum up: there is an understanding of the intentionality of mental states according to which all mental states immediately directed towards an idea or mental content, something that exists only in the mind. This account of intentionality seems taken for granted in the works of Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. And there is much in Kant’s language that suggests that he accepts the same basic structure of conscious states—that they are immediately of or about some mental entity called an “appearance,” and that these mental entities are numerically distinct from “things in themselves,” which are the ultimate mind-independent reality. But on this interpretation, Kant’s justification for any belief in this mind-independent realm get called into question. Our task in this course will be, at least in part, to articulate an interpretation of transcendental idealism where a commitment to metaphysical realism is not called into doubt. (Following Henry Allison, I would say that Kant’s transcendental idealism is what we might call “epistemological idealism” coupled with metaphysical realism.)

But enough of all of this for now. At this point, we need to look to the text and see how all these things develop in the perplexing and complicated things we find there.