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Intentionality

In the philosophical tradition started by the Scholastics and later revived by Franz Brentano and Edmund Husserl, intentionality is the property of human consciousness of being directed toward or being about something (another term for this notion of intentionality is "aboutness"). This notion of intentionality should be distinguished from the commonsense notion associated with the doing of something on purpose (as in "I had no intention of hurting anybody") or according to a plan (as in "My intention was to write a book"). The substitution of the first concept with the second is a common source of theoretical confusion.

Husserl is responsible for the most thorough discussion of intentionality so far. In a line of argument that is reminiscent of Gottlob Frege's distinction between "sense" *(Sinn)* and "reference" *(Bedeutung)*, Husserl distinguished between the intentional act (produced by the thinking, perceiving Subject) and the entity (or Object) about which the act occurs. Just like Frege had argued that it is possible to identify the same referent with different definite descriptions, each of which has a different meaning (for him, "sense") (e.g., we can identify Bill Clinton as "the President" or "Hillary's husband"), Husserl argued that a distinction is necessary between intentional acts and their Object (Frege's "reference"). While the Object may stay the same, the acts may change. For example, we can admire, despise, observe, or ignore the same person (or the same thing, idea, act, etc.). Husserl diverged from Frege in insisting that the meaning is always an act, that is, an intentional experience. The focus on acts as opposed to entities provided the foundations for Husserl's phenomenology: meanings are constituted in our consciousness through the different ways in which we engage with the world (whether real or imaginary). It is the ability to engage in such acts that makes us meaning-making individuals. It is the same ability that allows for communication to take place. For Husserl, sounds, gestures, or marks on a piece of paper become meaningful when they can be interpreted as produced by entities (e.g., human beings) who are judged capable of experiencing

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intentional acts, including the (rather complex) act of wanting their experiences (e.g., feelings, beliefs, wishes) communicated to others.

Intentionality plays an important role in J. L. Austin's theory of speech acts, Paul Grice's theory of meaning, and John Searle's theory of mind (an extension of his theory of speech acts). Intentionality is also seen as an important dimension for assessing children's cognitive development and evolution. Primatologists and other researchers have posited different levels of intentionality to distinguish between human intelligence and the intelligence of other species or that of machines. For example, Dorothy L. Cheney and Robert M. Seyfarth used Daniel Dennett's hierarchy of intentional systems for assessing the cognitive abilities of vervet monkeys. Zero-order intentional systems cannot have beliefs or desires. First-order intentional systems have beliefs and desires (e.g., "x believes/wants that p"), whereas second-order intentional systems have beliefs and desires about beliefs and desires (e.g., "x wants y to believe that p"), and so on. A third-order intentional system is needed for what Grice called "non-natural" meaning (typical of human communication): "for A to mean something by x . . . A must intend to induce by x a belief in an audience, and he must also intend his utterance to be recognized as so intended."

Grice's and other rationalist accounts of human action typically rely on a commonsense view of people's beliefs and desires. For anthropologists, the crucial issue is whether it is possible to separate intentional acts from the cultural context in which they are produced. Since the route to interpretation relies on conventionality as much as on intentionality, it is possible, and in fact quite common, that an audience may respond to what they judge to be contextually relevant conventions, ignoring the issue of the speaker's intentions. Ethnographers have also shown that the view that one can know what goes on in another person's mind is not shared by all cultures, and a difference in power or authority, sometimes defined in terms of expertise, may grant some individuals or groups the right to interpret while depriving others of the right to reclaim their original intentions. Furthermore, when we abandon imagined exchanges and look at actual interaction, we learn that participants cannot always know what their actions or words are meant to achieve, as shown by John Heritage for the particle *Oh!* in English.

Another line of research on intentionality is informed by the critique of Husserl's paradigm by his students and collaborators. For example, Martin Heidegger—who had been Husserl's assistant—built on the phenomenological approach but reframed intentionality as a derived rather than primordial capacity of human beings. Our intentional acts—and, ultimately, what we call rationality and science—are founded on a pre-theoretical being-in-the-world as a structure of human concern (or "care") always projected ahead of itself and filled with objects that are first and foremost understood pragmatically, that is, in terms of their use. Heidegger argued that meaning does not come from our intentional acts but from temporality, that is, the finitude that characterizes human life. A number of poststructuralist theorists have built on some of Heidegger's intuitions, working on a concept of intentionality (sometimes called "cognition") as distributed through acts

of participation in culturally constructed activities. Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* as a system of dispositions that guide people's intentionality in routinized activities is in this tradition. Other social scientists have highlighted the importance of tools (e.g., maps, measuring instruments) as well as the collaborative work of others in constituting what at first appear as individual intentional acts but under better scrutiny turn out to be collective (albeit not necessarily equally shared) accomplishments. Collaboration is certainly at work in development, when children learn to communicate through interactions with more competent members who guide, name, and reframe their intentional acts. The intersubjective construction of intentionality has been recently emphasized by linguistic anthropologists and other scholars who take seriously the view that language is a major resource for introspection and mutual monitoring.

(See also *agency, control, evolution, expert, participation, socialization, vision*)

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