MENTAL STATES AS PRESENTATIONS

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Franz Brentano is best known in philosophy for his view that intentionality, by which he meant directedness towards an object, is the "mark of the mental." However, before settling on this view, Brentano considered another mark: the idea that mental phenomena are *presentations.* Brentano says, "we may consider the following definition of mental phenomena as indubitably correct: that they are either presentations or they are based upon presentations."[1] While he was not completely satisfied with this definition of mental phenomena—due to its disjunctive form—he never rejected it. In this paper I elaborate and defend the idea that some mental states, experiences in particular, are presentations. I then argue that this presentational conception can help us see why mentality resists reductive explanation and that it draws our attention to a very difficult (but widely neglected) problem about mentality: the problem of presence.

What does Brentano mean by "presentation"? Consider Brentano's examples of mental phenomena: hearing a sound, seeing a colored object, feeling warmth or cold, as well as similar states of imagination.[2] In each case, there is, on the one hand, an act of consciousness—hearing, seeing, feeling, and imagining—and there is, on the other, an object of those acts: a sound, a colored object, warmth, cold, and that which is imagined. Mental phenomena always have this "act-object" structure. You cannot merely hear, or see, or feel. You always see, hear, or feel something. *Presentations*, Brentano says, are the acts of consciousness, the seeing, hearing, feeling, imagining, and so forth. He is careful to distinguish the *act of presentation* from the *thing presented* (the sound, colored object, warmth, etc.). He says, "By presentation I do not mean that which is presented, but rather the act of presentation."[3] Brentano was surely correct to insist on this. For, at least from a conceptual point of view, the mental phenomenon is not what we are aware of, but the awareness of it: the seeing, hearing, feeling, imagining, and so forth. In each case, the truly mental phenomenon is the presentation.

I propose to define the concept of a mental state in terms of presentations. First,

we need to make explicit the fact that presentations are presentations *to* something. If there is a presentation of some object or quality, then there is something to which it is presented. That to which some object or quality is presented is the subject of experience (hence forth, simply: "the subject").[4] We need to make reference to the subject for reasons over and above the conceptual point that "x is presented" implies "x is present to something." For, without reference to a subject, it is difficult to explain how it is that there can be a presentation of a sound (for instance) and a presentation of a color (for instance), even though there is no presentation of both a color and a sound. This is of course possible when the sound is presented *to one person*, the color is presented *to another*, but for neither are both the color and sound presented. Another case: there can be a presentation of x at t and there can fail to be a presentation of x at t. How is this not a contradiction? Because x is present to me, but not to you. We cannot merely speak of presentations—we need to posit subjects of experience as well. I can now state the conception of mental states I am proposing: mental states are states of subjects in virtue of which something (an object or quality) is presented to the subject.

I have two comments. First, on this conception, mental states are *posits*, in very much the same sense that atoms are posits. The basic "mental fact" is that things (objects, qualities) are present to subjects. Mental states are states that we posit to explain (in some sense of "explain") this basic mental fact—the fact that something is present to a subject. Mental states themselves, however, are not themselves empirically accessible. They are not present to us. They are, rather, posited to account for the fact that (other) things are present to us.

Descartes maintained that our concept of mind was neither sensory nor imagistic, that it was something we understood without the aid of either the senses or the imagination. On the conception of mental states advanced here, Descartes was correct. G.E. Moore (among others) was also correct to emphasize the transparency of the mental: the fact that when we attempt to introspectively discover mental states themselves, we fail. We "see through" the mental states themselves and find only the objects of those states. On the present proposal, this is because mental states themselves have no empirically available qualities. They are, rather, that which explains the presence of such qualities.

Second, this presentational conception of mental states is most plausible for *occurrent*, *conscious* mental states--experiences, in particular. It is not plausible for dispositional states such as standing beliefs and desires. This does not concern me much, since experiences are arguably the fundamental mental phenomenon. At any rate, I propose to restrict the presentational conception of mental states to experiences.

Why accept this conception of experience? I will offer three reasons.

First, the presentational conception of mental states captures something about the phenomenology of the mental. It is obvious that objects and qualities are present to us in experience. This is how things seem when one is having an experience. What is somewhat less obvious, but still true, is that this claim--that objects and qualities are present to us in experience--is a crucial addition to the familiar claim that mental states are directed at objects, that they display intentionality. For, it is not entirely clear that "having an object" requires that that object be present to the subject. The claim that mental states are presentations is a further claim that does justice to the phenomenol-

ogy.

Second, the presentational conception accounts for the conceptual connection between the occurrence of a mental state of a given kind and the sort of object or quality that is presented by that state. What makes an experience of red different from an experience of blue? Just the fact that the presented qualities are different. Why can you not have a *visual* experience of middle C? Because to have middle C presented is to have an *auditory* experience. The questions: "Have I had this experience before?" and "Has this object or quality been presented to me before?" always have the same answer. We simply have no grip on the sameness and difference of mental states except through the qualities they present. This is just what we should expect if mental states are presentations. For you cannot have a presentation without something's being presented and presentations differ only in terms of what they present. Necessarily, a presentation of X is different than a presentation of Y if and only if X is something different than Y. It is no surprise that mental states should be categorized via their objects if mental states are presentations.

Perhaps the most compelling reason to accept the presentational conception of mental states, however, is that it is the conception that emerges through reflection on the question of why human beings have the concept of a mental state at all. I have said that we posit mental states to account for the fact that objects and qualities are present to us. Why, though, speak of the "presence" of objects and qualities at all? Why not simply speak (and think) about the objects and qualities themselves? The answer, I believe, is that if we attempt to do so, we encounter contradictions that cannot be resolved solely in terms of object-concepts. We have to introduce mentalistic concepts to resolve these contradictions, and the concept we introduce is the concept of a presentation.

There are at least two sorts of circumstances in which sole reliance on object-concepts can lead to contradiction. The first sort of case goes as follows. An object is in front of you, in plain view (your eyes are open, the lights are on, etc.). Suppose now that a screen is placed between you and the object. Suppose you have enough of an object-concept to understand that objects do not cease to exist when a larger object is placed between you and the object in question. Now, since you believe that the object continues to exist, there is a fairly straightforward sense in which you believe it is still there (in the place it was before). But, there is also a sense in which it is *not* there. There is a difference, after all, between the way things are now, and the way things were moments ago, before the screen appeared. I claim that pure object-language cannot express the sense in which the object is "not there." It is not enough to say that there is an object between me and the original: after all, that would be true of a small object that does not block the first object. Indeed, it would be true even if the screen were transparent, or had a hole in it. To express the sense in which the object "isn't there," even though it is there, one needs to introduce the idea of a thing's being present to you. In the initial circumstance—when you can see the object—it is there (exists at a location) and it is present to you; in the second, it is there (exists at the same location) but it is not present to you. Contradiction avoided. It is clear that here we have introduced a mentalistic concept—the concept of seeing—and it is clear that it is a presentational concept.

The second sort of case involves afterimages and other hallucinated objects or qualities. Suppose you stare at a bright green square cast by a projector onto a white screen. After thirty seconds, the projector turns off and you see what appears to be a red square on the screen. If all we have to use are object-concepts, we are compelled to say that a red square is there, on the screen, just as the green square had been. Yet, (we may suppose) you also understand that the projector was turned off, or perhaps you believe the word of another person who has just come into the room and says that there is no red square on the screen. Here we have another contradiction: the red square is there, but it is not there. The only way to avoid this contradiction is to introduce a concept such as *a thing merely being present to me*. There is a presentation of a red square, even though there is no red square in physical space. Again, contradiction is avoided only via the introduction of the concept of presentation, and it is clear that this is a mentalistic concept (visual appearance).

This completes my defense of the presentational concept of some mental states. It captures a basic fact about the phenomenology of experience, accounts for the conceptual connection between how we categorize mental states and how we categorize the objects of those states, and it follows from a plausible account of why we need the concept of a mental state in the first place.

Even if you are convinced that we should think of some mental states (experiences) as presentations, you might wonder what we gain, philosophically, from conceiving of mental states in this way. I suggest two consequences. First, I think this conception at least partly explains why it can seem so difficult to give a reductive explanation of mental phenomena—even if mental phenomena do "reduce" to physical phenomena. Second, and more importantly, I believe that this way of thinking about mental states helps to draw out a problem about mentality that has received far too little attention in the philosophy of mind.

The first consequence shows why we should expect reductive explanation of mind to be difficult to come by, if mental states are conceived of as presentations. As noted above, mental states themselves have no empirically available properties. They are bare posits, hypothesized to explain the fact that objects and qualities are presented to us. We have no conception of them over and above their role as that which accounts for the presence of objects and qualities to us. As such, we really do not know what properties mental states have. Consequently, we do not know what a reductive explanation of mental states would be, because we do not know which properties to reduce to or explain in terms of lower level empirical properties. This can be true even if mental states are identical to sets of lower level physical properties.

I now turn to the second and most important consequence of thinking of mental states as presentations. This is that it draws our attention to an extremely difficult problem concerning mentality that has not received the attention it deserves, and this is the problem of *presence*. When we have experiences, objects and qualities are present to us. The problem emerges when we try to conceive of what could possibly explain this presence. I have said we invoke mental states to "explain" presence, but the problem can be restated: How can a subject's being in a certain state make it the case that *something else*—a book or a chair or a region of color—is *present* to that subject?

If this does not strike you as puzzling, note first that the presented object or quality

need not, and virtually always is not, a quality of the mental state or the subject. Furthermore, none of our usual forms of explanation appears adequate, even in principle, to explain the presence of objects or qualities to a subject. First, I think it is clear that no enumeration of facts about what is presented can explain presence. For suppose that what is presented is a normal physical object in the environment. Obviously, no number of facts about such an object can explain presence—for objects have the properties they have, and they are not always present to subjects.

Somewhat less obviously, it does not help to make the object presented a *mental* object. For if it is not sufficient, to explain presence, that a physical object have some set of properties, then it is not sufficient, to explain presence, that a mental object have some set of properties. I want to dwell on this point a moment, for I think it is important. Many discussions of the mind-body problem in contemporary philosophy are in fact discussions of the objects of experience. Consider the discussion of qualia. Qualia are features that characterize what it is like to have an experience, e.g., the redness of a ripe tomato or the pitch of a note played on a trumpet. It is clear that these qualities are among the things presented in experience. Now, it is true that these qualities are difficult to understand is physical terms. My point, however, is that even if we could solve this problem, even if we could give a plausible reductive analysis of qualitative properties, or even if we could identify them with properties of mental objects, a question would remain: Why are these properties *present to the subject?* This question remains open as ever. And, the reason is that *you cannot explain why something is present to a subject by describing properties of that which is present.*

Perhaps, then, we can explain the presence of objects or qualities in terms of properties of the subject? I don't think this works either. For, first, subjects typically don't *have* the properties we are aware of in experience (they are not red, or painful). And even if they did, it would not follow that those properties are present to the subject! This suggests a generalization of the principle noted above: you cannot explain the presence of a property to a subject merely by attributing that property to an object of any sort.

Of course, one who thinks that we should attempt to explain presence in terms of properties of a subject will no doubt say that we should appeal to properties other than those present in experience. The problem persists, though. For it is not clear why, in virtue of a thing's (a subject's) having any set of properties, a *different property (or object)* should be *present* to that subject. The attribution of one set of properties to a thing *may* of course entail the existence of another property or thing. But, that isn't enough to solve the problem of presence. For even if the *existence* of the presented property is established, the *presence* of that property to a subject is not.

A natural suggestion, at this point, is that presence is a relation. I don't think this holds much hope either. For presence is neither a temporal relation, a spatial relation, nor a causal relation. It is obvious that presence is neither temporal nor spatial. That leaves only the causal relation. However, it is nearly as obvious that the "presence relation" cannot be explained in terms of the causal relation. For, first, something can cause a mental state without being presented by that state. A charge from an electrode needn't present any "electric properties"--it might just cause the scent of burnt toast to be present to the subject. Second, there are compelling reasons to suppose that some

of the qualities present in experience are not properties of external objects at all--color is an example. If they are not properties of external objects, then their presence in experience cannot be explained by the fact that those properties cause the experience. Finally, there are some qualities that are present in experience for which it is obvious that they have no external cause--e.g., the black of the night sky. So, you cannot explain the presence of qualities to a subject merely by saying that those qualities cause a mental state in the subject. Neither is plausible to suppose that presence is to be explained by a mental state's causing the quality that is presented. Not everything that a mental state causes is presented: electrical signals to our muscles, for instance. More to the point: even if our mental states caused the qualities that are present in experience, there is no reason to suppose that the quality would *thereby* be presented. Effects are not typically present to their causes--why should they be in this case?

So we cannot explain the presence of qualities to a subject in terms of an object's possessing a certain set of qualities, nor can we explain it in terms of spatial, temporal, or causal relations. I don't know what sort of explanation remains. The problem of presence is a stubborn one.

One final point about the problem of presence. It is sometimes suggested that mentality is philosophically problematic because it is difficult to account for in physical terms. I contend that the problem of presence shows that this is not really true. For the problem of presence is not helped in the slightest by supposing that mental states are non-physical. The problem of presence is just as much a problem for the dualist as it is for the physicalist. This is a problem about the mind we face, and it seems equally difficult, regardless of our metaphysical position.

I have argued that some mental states—experiences—are presentations. This conception is phenomenologically plausible and it naturally emerges from reflections on why we possess the concept of a mental state. It also helps to explain why reductive explanations of mentality are so difficult to come by. Most importantly, however, it draws our attention to the problem of presence, a problem that every theorist about the mind faces, regardless of her metaphysics, and that resists any obvious solution.

Notes

1. Franz Brentano, "On the Distinction Between Mental and Physical Phenomena," *Philosophy of Mind*, ed. David Chalmers (Oxford UK: Oxford, 2002), 480.
2. Ibid, 479.
3. Ibid.
4. Brentano does not speak of the subject in his attempt to define the mental. He had a reason for this, but this need not detain us here.