Revisiting Phenomenal Intentionality
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Abstract This essay has two goals. The goal of the first section is to raise a few clarificatory questions about the exact contour of Crane’s account of intentionality, its relation to phenomenology, and his motivation for it. The second section aims to describe a general worry about programs that combine a broadly anti-externalist outlook on intentionality with the idea that there is an intimate connection between phenomenology and intentionality. I argue that programs like this either suffer from a problem that I call intentional luck or, in the attempt to avoid this problem, have to weaken the connection between intentionality and phenomenology. Since Crane’s general outlook falls under this program, it is subject to this worry.

KEYWORDS: Intentionality; Phenomenal Intentionalism; Externalism; Phenomenal Experience; Veridical Experience

AN OVERARCHING THESIS IN CRANE’S volume is that intentionality is the “defining characteristic” of the mental, the feature in virtue of which the mental is a unified subject matter. Three notable components of Crane’s account of intentionality, put in very general terms, are: (a) intentional states are not constituted by relations; in particular, they are not constituted by relations to propositions or concrete particulars, (b) there are multiple senses of intentional content and experiences have multiple contents corresponding to these different senses of content, and (c) there is a constitutive relationship be-
tween intentionality and phenomenal consciousness. I shall refer to these theses as non-relationalism, pluralism, and phenomenal intentionalism respectively.¹

In the first section of this short essay I raise three questions about what I find rather puzzling about Crane's construal of these theses and the dialectical relation between them. I do not think that my remarks in this section should be particularly troubling for Crane, because I suspect that they can be addressed by clarifying a few theses or modifying them in minor ways that would not change their spirit.

The second section turns to what I regard to be a more substantive issue. Here, I focus on phenomenal intentionalism. Crane is not alone in his advocacy of the idea that there is an intimate connection between phenomenal character and intentionality. The view has been popular in recent philosophy of mind.² In fact, Crane's view would fit into an anti-externalist brand of phenomenal intentionalism,³ by which I mean one that combines the phenomenal intentionality thesis with the thesis that experiences, even when they are veridical, are not constituted by relations to external concrete particulars.

I used to be a strong advocate of the anti-externalist brand of phenomenal intentionalism.⁴ But a worry about the view has been gradually growing in me, a worry for which I have not been able to find a satisfying solution. Since this general worry about the anti-externalist brand of phenomenal intentionalism, I think it would apply to Crane's view too. My goal in the second section is to elaborate on this worry.

### Crane's three theses

One puzzling aspect of Crane's overall picture concerns Crane's appeal to content pluralism to motivate the thesis that intentional states, specifically experiences, are not relations to propositions. Content pluralism, which Crane credits Chalmers for, is the view that (a) there are many different senses of the term “content” responding to different theoretical demands, and (b) intentional states can typically have multiple contents corresponding to these different senses of content.

For example, experiences can have a layer of Fregean content that accounts for their phenomenology (or some aspect of their phenomenology) and a layer of Russellian content that accounts for our intuitions about their truth value or accuracy. However, it is not clear to me why the idea that relations to propositions only models experiences explains content pluralism. As Crane argues, if experiences are relations to propositions and there are multiple, and sometimes incompatible, propositions that experiences are relations to, then it seems at best peculiar that experiences have a uniform and coherent phenomenal character.

But a pluralist about content who wishes to be an intentionalist does not have to endorse the additional thesis that all different senses of content are relevant to the nature of experience. In fact, pluralism about content seems to provide some help for those who wish to identify experiences with relations to propositions. An analogy with a well-known case in meta-ethics might help us see why.

When Mackie argued from moral pluralism to moral anti-realism, his reasoning was that different cultures have conflicting moral codes. Given this conflict we seem to face the problem of having to choose which set of moral codes is right and which is wrong. Mackie was unhappy with this forced choice. So he argued that rather than declaring one moral code correct and another incorrect, we should embrace moral anti-realism and declare all moral codes as false. Mackie thus used the premise that there is widespread disagreement to motivate moral anti-realism. And for this reason, one of the reactions that his argument invited was to deny that there is such a widespread disagreement.

Davidson, for example, famously argued that widespread disagreement is impossible because if different cultures widely disagree on the application of moral evaluative terms,
then they are not strictly speaking disagreeing because they are not using these terms in the same sense. Mackie and Davidson are both pluralists, albeit in different ways. Where Mackie is a pluralist about moral codes, Davidson is a pluralist about the meaning of evaluative terms that figure in moral codes. More importantly, Davidson’s pluralism is compatible with realism and in fact comes to save it from Mackie’s attack.

As I understand it, Chalmers’ content pluralism is closer in spirit to Davidson’s pluralism about the meaning of evaluative terms than Mackie’s pluralism about evaluative judgments. Chalmers’s pluralism thus dissolves the apparent disagreement about whether the content of experience is Fregean or Russelian. As the dissolution of the disagreement would take away the motivation for Mackie’s antirealism, the pluralist dissolution of the disagreement seems to take away the motivation for rejecting the view that experiences can be identified with relations to propositions. Crane thinks otherwise, and it is not clear to me why.

Crane’s commitment to the non-relationalist account of intentionality goes hand in hand with his rejection of the thesis that intentional states, including beliefs and perceptual experiences, are fundamentally relations to propositions. But Crane combines this rejection with a second thesis. This is the thesis that it is “literally true” that beliefs and experiences are relations to propositions.

There is, again, an apparent tension here that Crane addresses by holding that relations to propositions only model intentional states and talk about relations to proposition, although literally true, is just theoretician’s talk. But it is puzzling to me how the labels of “modeling” and “theoreticians talk” remove the tension between non-relationalism and the idea that it is literally true that intentional states are relations to propositions.

A central method for doing metaphysics has been to read our ontology from the models that we regard as true. Most Platonist about properties, for example, are realists about properties because they hold that the correct way to model the similarities between objects is to hold that they stand in instantiation relations to the same property in the Platonic realm. Realist about numbers, for example, often hold that the best way to account for the truth of true statements in number theory is to read their explicit quantificational commitments at face value. Thus, if it is true that there is exactly one even prime number then it is true that numbers exist. It is for the same reason that some moral anti-realists are error theorists.

This is not to say that it is not possible to reconcile the denial of the claim that a model captures the fundamental nature of truth makers for a domain of discourse with the idea that the model is literally true. One might hold that the apparent existential commitments of a model can be removed with correct analysis. Accordingly, we can account for the literal truth of statements such as “An average American owns .75 dogs” without committing ourselves to the existence of average Americans and the property of owning .75 dogs. We can do so because what we mean by this statement is that the total number of dogs owned by Americans divided by the total number of Americans is .75. But Crane does not seem to adopt a strategy like this. His non-relationalist account of intentionality is not an account of what people who think that intentional states are relations to propositions mean.

A second way to remove the tension is to provide a non-standard semantics for the model that does not analyze its truth in terms of reference and satisfaction. Attempts to provide inferential role or conceptual role semantics fall within this category. But although Crane opposes semantic accounts of intentionality, his preferred substitute is a phenomenological account, not an inferential role semantics. I therefore find it strange that Crane does not simply deny the truth of the claim that intentional states are relations to propositions.

The third puzzling aspect of Crane’s view has to do with the fact that he combines the
thesis that intentionality is not a relation with the view that all intentional states have intentional objects. In fact, on his view, it is a definitional truth that intentionality consists in the directedness of the mind toward a subject matter, that is, the intentional object of the intentional state. However, talk about directedness and having objects sounds relational. There is, therefore, an apparent tension here.

If intentionality is essentially non-relational, how could it be definitional that all intentional states have an object? I think that there are several ways to understand the non-relationality thesis that would remove this tension. However, these solutions do not seem to be available to Crane. Let me elaborate.

The natural analysis of non-relationality is that an intentional state consists in the instantiation of a monadic property by a subject or one of its states. How does this square with the thesis that all intentional states have an object? One option is to hold that intentionality consists in the instantiation of a specific class of monadic properties that can only be characterized with relational locutions, for example, “thinks-about-x”, “sees-y”, etc. But this move leaves our basic question unanswered. One still wonders why intentional properties could be only characterized by relational locutions.

One possible answer is that it is in the nature of intentional properties that their instantiation brings about the existence of intentional objects. We thus get intentional objects, as it were, for free. But this view has the implication that intentional objects are immanent to intentional states, and Crane explicitly rejects this view. A second answer is that there is something about the grammar of intentional discourse that imposes this constraint on monadic intentional properties. However, this solution also seems to be unavailable to Crane. For, in his polemic against Wittgensteinian views, he also explicitly rejects grammatical construals of intentionality.

The solution that seems to be the closest to the letter of Crane’s view is to endorse a phenomenological conception of directedness or aboutness. Accordingly, intentional states have an essential phenomenology of directedness or aboutness, and this grounds the fact that they can only be described in relational terms. However, this seems to clash with another aspect of Crane’s overall outlook. On Crane’s version of phenomenal intentionalism, phenomenal consciousness is grounded in the entire intentional nature of mental states. So, Crane seems to ground phenomenology in intentionality. But the phenomenological solution seems to ground intentionality in phenomenology.

As a last option, perhaps Crane’s rejection of relationalism should only be understood as a rejection of the view that intentionality consists in a relation to either propositions or concrete particulars. This would leave room for a modest form of relationalism according to which intentionality can be understood in terms of relations to non-propositional abstracta. But I am not sure about this reading, because crane’s text often suggests that he rejects any brand of relationalism.

I, therefore, do not see how Crane removes the tension between the non-relationality of intentionality and the relationality of intentional talk, both of which he seems to endorse.

### Phenomenal intentionalism

I ended the previous section with a question about the correct way to understand Crane’s denial of relationalism about intentionality. I also noted that Crane grounds the phenomenal character of experience in its intentional nature, which makes his non-relationalism rather puzzling. No matter how Crane responds to these worries, I think it would be correct to say that his view would fit into an anti-externalist brand of phenomenal intentionalism, by which I mean one that combines the thesis that there is a constitutive connection between intentionality and phenomenal character with the thesis that experiences are not constituted by relations to external concrete particulars.

This thesis is compatible with the view
that experiences are a matter of the instantiation of certain monadic properties by the subject (or the states of the subject), certain relations between the subject (or the states of the subject) and the domain of universals, or a combination thereof. As I noted earlier, I have grown somewhat worrisome about this view. The worry, put roughly, is that the anti-externalist account of experience seems to be in tension with the idea that concrete external particulars can be intentional objects of experience. In this section, I want to elaborate on this worry.

I find it undeniable that ordinary external particulars can be intentional objects of experiences. This is partly because it seems very intuitive that we sometimes become aware of such particulars by experiencing them. When I saw the Eiffel tower for the first time, it was in virtue of having the experience that I was able to become aware of the tower. So I find it natural to say that the tower was one of the intentional objects of my experiential awareness.

Note that I do not say that the tower was the only intentional object of my experience. Perhaps my experiences also had some universals as intentional objects or perhaps my experience was also a form of self-awareness. And perhaps my awareness of the Eiffel tower was in some way dependent on the fact that these other objects were intentional objects of my experience. So maybe the fact that the tower was an intentional object of my experience was somehow mediated by these other items. But none of this would entail that the Eiffel tower was not one of the intentional objects of my experiential awareness.

For these reasons, I think that, despite his explicit denial of the view that concrete particulars are intentional objects of experience, Crane would not disagree with my claim here. For, as I understand his view, Crane has a demanding notion of intentional objects in mind when he denies that concrete particulars can be the intentional objects of experiences.

I am using the term in a much more permissive way that does not have the implication that my experience or its intentionality were constituted by a relation to the Eiffel power. Under this permissive sense, I find it undeniable that the Eiffel tower was an intentional object of my experience. My worry is that this undeniable fact seems to be in tension with anti-externalism about experience.

Here is a question that gives rise to the worry: given that on the anti-externalist picture experiences are constituted by either the instantiation of monadic properties or relations to universals, how could experiences ground a relation to an ordinary external particular?

The standard internalist answer to this question is to appeal to an idea that echoes Frege's maxim that sense determines reference. Accordingly, although experience is at best a relation to universals, it gives us a set of constraints that determines which particulars are the objects of experience. My experience of the Eiffel tower, for example, determines a unique set of conditions that are satisfied by the Eiffel tower and it is in virtue of satisfying these conditions that the Eiffel tower is the intentional object of my experience.

But I do not find the Fregean solution satisfying, at least not when it is combined with what I take to be the spirit of phenomenal intentionalism. To explain why, let me start with a thought experiment. Consider a possible subject who is going through a stream of conscious experience that is phenomenally identical with my experience as I am looking at the Eiffel tower. But, unlike me, this subject has no causal connection with the external world in which it is located. For all we know, the subject might be a disembodied soul who is undergoing a random series of experiences that are phenomenally identical with my experience.

Borrowing a term from Kriegel, I call this subject the space soul. Let us also add to our thought experiment that in the space soul's world there actually is a qualitative duplicate of the Eiffel tower located exactly in the same distance and direction from the space soul's point of view. Let us call this tower the D-tower.

Now, on the Fregean take on phenomenal intentionalism experiences that have identi-
cal phenomenal characters impose similar constraints on their intentional objects. My experience presents an object that has such and such characteristics, the space soul’s experience imposes similar constraints. In my case, there is an object, namely the Eiffel tower that satisfies such constraints. Fregeans, therefore seem to have a story to tell about how the Eiffel tower is one of the intentional objects of my experience. What about the space soul’s case?

I want to argue that Fregean phenomenal intentionalists face a dilemma in this case. Either they adopt a view of the constraints that has the implication that the D-tower satisfies these constraints or they adopt a view of the constraints that implies that the D-tower does not satisfy the constraints. However, both of these options are problematic, or so I shall argue.

For the sake of argument, I assume that the alleged constraint that the experience of the space soul puts on its intentional object can be captured by an existential description. This would facilitate the discussion but the conclusion that I want to draw does not hinge on it. We can assume that the constraint can be characterized with the generic form “there is an $x$ that has characteristics $y_1, ..., y_n$, were $y_1, ..., y_n$ range over monadic and relational properties. We can allow that these relations can be indexed to or centered on the space soul.

This would enable us to include reference to some particulars in the characterization of the relations namely, relations to the space soul itself, its experience, the possible world in which it exists, and the spatio-temporal location of its point of view. So a subset of $y_1, ..., y_n$ stands for the relations that $x$ bears to these particulars. The crucial question is this: What are the properties and relations that we can allow in the description of the constraints? In particular, are we allowed to include a causal relation between $x$ and the space soul (or its experience) in the characterization of the constraints? The answer to this question determines which horn of the aforementioned dilemma we locate ourselves in.

One option is to restrict the range of $y_1, ..., y_n$ to a small set of properties and relations that excludes causal relations between $x$ and the space. This would leave it open for the constraints to be determinate enough to single out the D-tower as their only satisfier. So on this view, as the single satisfier of the constraints, the D-tower would be the intentional object of the space soul’s experience. But this is, in my view, a problematic implication because it is just a matter of pure luck that the D-tower fits the alleged constraints that the space soul’s experience imposes on the world and it is hard to see how being the intentional object of an experience can be just a matter of pure luck.

In assuming that something cannot be the intentional object of an experience just as a matter of pure luck, I am assuming that the norms that govern intentional talk are, in an important respect, similar to the norms that govern knowledge talk. In the same way that one might hold an anti-luck account of knowledge that rejects attributions of knowledge of an object in cases of luck, one might also adopt an anti-luck view of intentionality that rejects regarding an object as an intentional object in cases of luck. In fact, one might argue that because there is an intimate connection between knowledge and intentionality anti-luck views of knowledge can be used in an argument for anti-luck views of intentionality.

Let us suppose that the D-Tower is one of the intentional objects of the space soul’s experience. Let us also suppose that experience can be a source of knowledge about its intentional objects. It follows that the space soul knows that the D-Tower has such and such properties. But again, it is just a matter of pure luck that what the space soul comes to believe about the D-Tower as a result of its experiences matches the properties that the D-tower has. The space soul just got lucky. It does not know anything about the D-Tower. So we get a reductio against the view that the D-tower is an intentional object for the space soul’s experience.

It might be argued that the premise that
experience can be a source of knowledge about its intentional objects is problematic. But unless one subscribes to a radical form of skepticism or an externalist account of perceptual knowledge, it is not clear that this observation would suffice to block the intuition that underwrites the argument. For we can modify the argument by replacing the target premise with a modified version according to which when some auxiliary requirements are satisfied, experience can be a source of knowledge about its intentional objects. Therefore, unless one could show that the auxiliary requirements for the attribution of knowledge cannot be satisfied in the case of the space soul, we get our reductio.

Epistemologists disagree about what these auxiliary conditions are and, of course, there are externalist epistemologies under which one cannot say that the experience of the space soul is a source of knowledge. But views that are compatible with internalism do not seem to have this implication. For example, views that are sometimes dubbed as liberal identify the auxiliary conditions with the absence of defeaters⁹, views that are sometimes dubbed as conservative identify them with a priori justification for the relia-

bility of experience¹⁰, and contextualist views identify them with the obtaining of specific types of contexts of knowledge attribution.¹¹

But on none of these views, the auxiliary conditions seem to be related to the space soul’s condition in a manner that implies that they cannot be satisfied in the space soul’s case. Of course an anti-externalist phenomenal intentionalist can adopt an externalist account of knowledge. But I find the rejection of the view that the D-tower is an intentional object for the space soul’s experience much more comforting than such a combination.

I shall call the above problem, “the problem of intentional luck”. Obviously, my discussion of this problem has been quick and sketchy. But I am not worried about this sketchiness because my aim here is to sketch the contours of my worry. So let me turn to the other horn of the dilemma.

The intuitive solution to the intentional luck problem is to add an appropriate causal requirement to the constraints that the space soul’s experience puts on the world around it. For example, one could add to the characteristics of x that it is the cause of this experience, were “this experience” refers to the experience of the space soul. On this construal the D-tower would not be an intentional object of the space soul’s experience because by assumption there is no causal relation between the D-tower and the space soul’s experience. So the problem of luck would not get off the ground.

In general, adding the causal condition to the constraints would block the luck problem. For, if the intentional object of an experience is its cause, then it is not a matter of pure luck that the object satisfies the constraints that the experience imposes.

I do not disagree with the insight that adding the causal constraint helps with the problem of luck. The problem is that it is not clear how such a solution would be available to the phenomenal intentionalist. For on this view, the constraints that experiences imposes on its intentional objects have to have an intimate connection to the phenomenology of experience and the most straightforward analysis of this connection is incompatible with adding the required causal clause to the constraints that space soul’s experience imposes on the world.

The most straightforward analysis of the connection between the phenomenology of an experience and the constraints that it imposes on the world, in my view, is that all and only properties and relations that are phenomenally manifest in an experience can enter the characterization of the constraints that it imposes on its objects.

When you experience a red apple in a “reddish” way, then redness is phenomenally manifest to you; when you experience it as having an “apple-like” shape; then that kind of shape is manifest to you; if you experience it as being next to a banana, then the relation of being next to is phenomenally manifest to you.
Phenomenal intentionalists could disagree about what it takes for a property to become phenomenally manifest. Nevertheless, the principle that what is phenomenally manifest to you is the determinant of the constraints that your experience puts on its targets is, in my view, a fundamental component of the set of intuitions that motivates phenomenal intentionalism. One might even be tempted to argue that the thesis that phenomenally identical experiences impose similar constraints on the world is grounded on this principle. So I think that this principle is an integral component of the spirit of the phenomenal intentionalist approach to intentionality.

But if we allow this constraint, then we cannot add the causal clause to the characterization of the constraints that the space soul’s experience (or my experience) impose on the world. In my case, although it might be true that the Eiffel tower is the cause of my experience, the Eiffel tower is not manifest to me as the cause of my experience. In other words, my experience does not manifest to me a causal relation between the Eiffel tower and itself. So in an important sense, including the clause that the object is the cause of my experience to the characterization of the constraints would not be faithful to the phenomenal character of my experience. This is not to say that experience can never present causal relations.

I actually think that experiences can, and often do, make causal relations among objects and events manifest to us. The point is simply that this is not the case in a normal visual experience in which we simply see an objet, say my visual experience of the Eiffel tower. Since the space soul has the same phenomenology as mine, then the same point applies to its experience. So I do not see how the phenomenal intentionalist might be able to add the causal clause to the constraints that the space soul’s experience puts on the world either.

I therefore do not see how the anti-externalist brand of phenomenal intentionalism could account for the fact that ordinary particulars can be intentional objects of some experiences. The natural option for the anti-externalist would be to explain this fact in Fregesian terms namely, in terms of constraint satisfaction. But I have argued that this choice would present the phenomenal intentionalist with a dilemma.

If she does not allow the experience-based constraints to include appropriate causal clauses, she runs into the problem of intentional luck. But if she allows the experience-based constraints to include the relevant causal relations then she would be violating the principle that experience-based constraints have to be faithful to the phenomenology of experience.

I suspect that one way that Crane might respond to the above challenge is to appeal to a pluralism about intentionality. Accordingly, he might hold that there are different senses of intentionality and the type of intentionality that the phenomenal intentionalist aims to account for is not one under which ordinary particulars can be intentional object of experience.

But I think this brand of phenomenal intentionalism would concede too much valuable ground. One of the potential attractions of the view that experiences are intentional is that the view can potentially make sense of the idea that it is in virtue of having experiences that the mind can come to have the external world of particulars as the subject matter of its attitudes.

But if phenomenal intentionality cannot deliver this result, it looses a great deal of what made it attractive.

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### Notes

1 Phenomenal intentionalism is often used in more specific senses. For example, one common charac-
terization is that there is a type of intentionality that is grounded in phenomenal character. I use the label in a less specific sense that is compatible with views that ground phenomenal character in content or those that put phenomenal character and content at the same metaphysical level.


3 The reasons that I use the cumbersome locution “was able to become aware” in place of the simple locution “was aware” is that in addition to having the experience I needed to attend to the Eiffel tower in order to become aware of it in the sense that is relevant to intentionality.


5 I take it that the metaphysical possibility of the space soul is an implication of anti-externalist accounts of experience. For, on such a view experiences are either constituted internally or by relations to universals and relations to universals, come, as it were, for free.

6 This is compatible with saying that these constraints are not identical. For example, my experience puts the constraint that there is an object that is twenty yards away from my point of view while the space soul’s experience puts the constraint that there is an object that is twenty yards away from his/her point of view.


10 A similar idea is sometimes called the “phenomenal adequacy” criterion. See D. CHALMERS, Perception and the Fall from Eden, cit., for discussion.