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Attention, Intentionality and Spatiality[1]

Introduction

In what follows, I argue that there is a sense in which attention is a part of experience or consciousness, and not something added when we are attentive or pay attention. Lapses of attention, accordingly, can explain interruptions in our experience of *things*, but whether certain objects like pains go on existing after our attention has been distracted seems problematical. The concept of attention is also an intentional concept. Using Brentano's notion of inexistence, I try to argue that it is intentional in more ways than some accounts of the matter allow.

The active/passive Distinction

It seems that when we experience something, the object of our experience can be described as an object of our attention.[2] When I see or hear something for example, what I see or hear are objects of my attention, and my attention can be said to be upon them. My attention's being on something, therefore, may be regarded as part of my experiencing it. The same holds true of my being conscious of, and being aware of something. Here again, when I am conscious or aware of an object my attention is on it, though with the difference this time that I can't fail to recognize what it is that my attention is on. I can see something dangerous without realizing that it is dangerous, but I cannot be conscious of or aware of something dangerous without knowing that that is what it is.

Now there is a difference between having *one's* attention on the object which one is experiencing and, say, *keeping* one's attention on it. In the second case one is doing something and in the first case one is not. There is accordingly, nothing in the notion of attention (though there may be other reasons) that obliges us to regard experience as a form of activity, as Kant and perhaps Brentano[3] seem to have done. This active/passive distinction may be illustrated as follows. Let us suppose that I hear a loud explosion. It can hardly fail to be an object of my attention. But it scarcely lasts long enough for me to be said to listen to it. Or again, if I catch sight of a shooting star, I might be said to see it but not, without some oddity, to watch it. Thus there are occasions when our attention is merely on something, and when it is caught or held. Per contra, there are occasions when we keep our attention on, or pay attention to something, or turn

or give our attention to it. The distinction is not always accurately reflected in our ordinary vocabulary of attention words.

"Having one's attention on" may be innocuous in this respect, but "attending" implies that one is doing something, and one's attention's being "focused", "directed" or "concentrated upon" suggests that acts of focusing, directing and concentrating have taken place. Nor is the distinction clearly marked in the verbs we use to report our experiences. The contrast between hearing and listening, and between seeing and watching has already been noted. Tasting can perhaps be paired in the same way with savouring. In savouring (the wine taster would be an example) we pay attention to what we taste, the better to enjoy and evaluate it. And arguably the same applies in the case of smell. But for some reason, there is no appropriate correlate word for the verb "to feel" either in the sense of touching or in the proprioceptor sense where, for example, one can feel one's arm moving.

Quite how our attention is on something, or kept on it, varies. All my attention may be on something. Watching something closely may involve paying attention to the details as well as to the salient features. Listening to something with greater attention may be an improved defence against being distracted. And increased attention is not always found with increased alertness. However hard I concentrate on something when I am tired, I cannot greatly reduce the risk that I will fail to notice something about it.

Up till now, we have considered cases where what our attention is on is an object which we are currently experiencing. Now there are other cases, of course, where the object of our attention is or may be, beyond the range of our present experience, or of any experience at all. Some of these cases may be identified as follows.

(1) The radar operator, firstly, looking at a blip on the radar screen may be said to have his attention fixed on the oncoming ship as it approaches through the fog. Similarly, someone's attention may be on the level of the petrol in the petrol tank as he watches the petrol guage, or on the impending storm as he glances intermittently at the barometer. These are cases where we can make an inference from something we experience to what may be an unperceived cause or co-effect, and they often take the form of our monitoring it or mounting surveillance over it. Overlapping with them, though perhaps not coinciding with them, are cases of seeing that. The radar operator sees that another ship is approaching through the fog, the driver sees that the petrol is about to run out and the weatherman that a storm is coming.

(2) Our attention can also be on something which we may not be currently experiencing without implying the possibility of an inference. Thinking about something provides an example.[4] If I am thinking about something, my attention must be on what I am thinking about, though I may be mistaken as to what it is. This seems to hold true whether we take thinking in

a narrow or wider sense. My attention must be on what I am thinking about whether I think only in images or in words as well.

(3) What I am talking about may also be an object of my attention. But here there are difficulties. Whilst my attention must be on what I am thinking about, it does not have to be on what I am talking about, unless my talking takes the form of thinking out loud. I can talk in my sleep when nothing has my attention. As I talk about one thing my attention may be on another. And even on those occasions when my talk and attention have the same object, it might be doubted whether it is by virtue of my talking about it that my attention is on it. As we shall see, when we are talking we may be directing other peoples' attention on to something. It is not clear that we are doing the same thing with our own.

(4) What someone is saying when we hear them speak can be an object of our attention. For this to be possible, we must, of course, hear the sounds they utter, and we do, admittedly, use expressions like "hearing what they say" and "listening to what they say", as well as the more neutral "paying attention to what they say". But for all this, when our attention is on what they are saying it seems to be upon something abstract that is not and cannot be experienced. Much the same seems to apply in the case of writing. As I read a letter my attention will normally be on what is said in it. And this seems to be distinct from any perceivable phenomenon like the arrangement of marks on a piece of paper.

(5) The notion of what someone says as an object of attention in this way enables us to make the link mentioned above between attention and talk. If I am listening to what someone else is saying, and understand it, then it seems that my attention, besides being on what he is saying, will also be on what he is talking about. If I listen to someone talking about what the Prime Minister is doing and I understand him, then while I listen, the Prime Minister's acts are objects of my attention. One's attention, therefore, can be on something when one is hearing about it, reading about it or listening to someone talking about it.

It might be objected that this last case is just a special version of the first, where our attention is on something which we can infer from our current experience. One might be tempted to claim, for example, that what the speaker is talking about causes him to talk about it, and that we can, accordingly, infer it from his verbal behaviour. And so there might be thought to be some analogy with the blip on the radar screen since the oncoming ship causes the blip and so enables us to infer its approach. Then again, the blip, the gauge and the barometer convey information and their behaviour can be regarded as having a certain meaning which can be interpreted and understood. On this theory, therefore, there is more similarity than difference between having one's attention on the oncoming ship as one watches the blip, and having one's attention on the ship as one listens to the radar operator reporting its approach through the fog. But the dis-

analogies, of course, are considerable, and here we enter the territory of a familiar debate.[5] One objection might be noted. What the speaker is talking about and what the hearer has his attention on, might be an imaginary object like a character from fiction. It might be doubted whether an imaginary object could enter into casual relationships and so be inferred, at least in the senses of "cause" and "inferred" that are appropriate in the radar operator example.

In some of the foregoing cases, attention seems to be dependent on reference.[6] Talking about something and thinking about something where the thinking is done in words, require the use of referring expressions. Any attempt to eliminate referring expressions therefore, will have the undesirable consequence of denying modes of attention which are defined by the notion of being about. On the face of it, the Theory of Descriptions seems free from this defect since it allows the residual category of logically proper names. But it still fails to do justice to the notion of attention, for we frequently think about things, for example, and so have our attention on them where the referring expressions we use are not of this kind. They are not such that they must have a reference, nor are their meanings the same as the things they refer to. The existential sentences which Russell uses to replace the subject-predicate sentences containing these referring expressions are not about anything, and so they can not be related to attention in the required way.

In the analysis so far, we have recognized two main categories of attention, namely one where the object is something we are currently experiencing, and the other where it is not, or at least may not be. The qualification has to be added, of course, since, to take some examples, one can think about something as one watches it or look at what the speaker is talking about. Now the second main category of attention, like the first, is subject to an active/passive distinction. Thinking about something is not always an act. A thought about some person or thing can simply occur to me, with the result that my attention will be on something without my doing anything. The distinction also applies in at least some of the other cases we listed. We can hear someone saying something but pay no attention to what they are saying because we do not find it interesting. I probably hear a brief remark made to me unexpectedly rather than listen to it. Reading about something is admittedly an act, but hearing about it is not. And so I might merely hear about distant events if I am indifferent to them instead of following them closely as the reports come in.

Attention and Intentionality

Included among the things that our attention can be on are intentional objects. On a weak definition, an intentional object is an object of a mental state, like seeing or thinking. Some mental states have objects only in some cases. One can be just depressed without being depressed about anything. One can be simply alert, though if one is on the alert for something, then one's state of alertness

has an object. But nothing counts as one's being in an attentional state where one's attention is not on anything. In the weak sense therefore, attention is always an intentional phenomenon.

On a stronger definition, however, the object of a mental state is intentional only if it is capable, in Brentano's phrase, of being inexistent. What we fear, expect or imagine, may be intentional objects in the strong sense. What we fear or expect may never happen, and what we imagine may not exist. Now some writers, like Alan White,[7] for example, have argued that in the strong sense, the concept of attention is an intentional concept only in the case of thinking. But it will be clear from the analysis above that attention is strongly intentional in more cases than this. We can hear about, read about and listen to someone talking about feared, expected and imaginary events and objects just as much as we can think about them. Once there is communication, it is difficult to see how attentional access to strongly intentional objects could be restricted to cases of thinking alone. Even if we admit this, however, it still seems possible to argue that the notion of attention is a hybrid with respect to intentionality in the strong sense. In the first category of attention, where we experience what our attention is on, all the objects of our attention, so it seems, must exist. What one sees and feels, must exist to be seen and felt. This view, however, is less certain than it looks. To evaluate it we must first consider what might be called the state and object theories of mental objects.[8] According to the state theory, there are no mental particulars, such as pains and images. There is only the experiencer in various psychological states. In one form for example, the theory claims that my experiencing a mental particular may be analyzed adverbially as my sensing in such and such a way. Thus my feeling a pain might be rendered as my sensing painfully, my having a red after image as my sensing redly and my having an hallucination of a monster as my sensing monsterly. One objection to this, however, is that where there are two mental particulars, say an x and a not-x, the theory will have the embarrassing consequence that I will be sensing contradictorily both xly and not-xly. A further objection, and one more to our purpose, is that the theory is unable to account for the place of attention in experience. Sensing xly might be supposed to imply sensing attentionly where the alleged attentional state lacks an object. But attention, as we have seen, must be on something. The only object that the theory seems to allow is the experiencer in some psychological state or other. When I feel a pain, however, or have an hallucinatory experience, my attention is on the pain or the hallucinatory object. It may also, of course, be on myself as the subject feeling the pain or being hallucinated, but that is not the same thing. The pain, indeed, may be so intense and the hallucinatory monster so convincing, that my attention is unlikely to be on anything else, myself included.

There is at least one other version of the state theory, but that fares no better. In this form the theory claims that my having, say, an after image of an x, or an hallucination of an x, may be analyzed as my seeming to see an x. Stated this way, of course, the theory can hardly apply to pains. Nor could it apply to after

images or hallucinatory objects, were they to bear little resemblance to physical objects. They might, for example, have colours possessed by no physical phenomena, and have shapes conforming to different geometries. Even where it does apply, however, the theory is hard to defend. If, firstly, we use the formulation "seeming to see an x", or more broadly, "seeming to experience an x", we may concede too much to the object theorist. For seeming to experience something, it will be argued, implies the existence of a seeming object, and this will turn out to be the very mental particular that the state theory is trying to eliminate. And even if, secondly, this objection is set aside, there still remains a serious difficulty concerning attention. Whilst I may merely seem to see a monster in the hallucination case, for example I really do have my attention on something, namely, the monster-like hallucinatory object.

We seem obliged, therefore, to abandon the state theory and embrace the object theory. Mental objects must be accepted as genuine particulars that we are conscious of and experience, and which resist being reduced to the psychological states of the experiencer. Yet if we adopt the object theory, other problems arise. Pains can be located in the body or in the body image, and hallucinatory objects arguably in the experiencer's physical surroundings. But after images, and certainly the images we have when we visualize, present a greater difficulty. If we cannot locate them, and if we accept the dictum that to exist is to exist somewhere, then their status as genuine particulars becomes doubtful. Abstract objects like propositions and numbers form exceptions to the dictum, but images scarcely count as abstract objects. Emotions and passions are without spatial location, but these can be analyzed as states of the experiencer. And so, as a compromise solution, it might be suggested that these images are indeed mental particulars, but only to the extent that they are strongly intentional objects and capable, therefore, of inexistence.[9] If this is correct, then the hybrid theory of attention seems to be undermined. In this case at least, the strongly intentional object of our attention appears to be something that can also be an object of our experience.

Attention and Spatiality

It was claimed in the first part of the argument that our attention is on something by virtue of our experiencing it or being conscious of it. Now when our attention ceases to be on an object, our experience of that object ceases as well. I cease to hear the music on the radio as my mind wanders and perhaps alights on something else. Similarly, we can bring our experience of something to an end by removing and then maybe relocating the attentional element in it. It might be noted that this seems to be the only way in which we can terminate an experience of something, while remaining conscious, by performing a purely mental act. The other ways seem to require physical action of some sort, like,

say, interfering with a sensory organ, or introducing some other change into the physical environment.[10]

It remains to ask how it is possible that our experience of something should be ended by a lapse of attention when the object continues to exist. Some notorious cases seem to show how elusive the answer is. Pains are sometimes said to continue unfelt when the victim's attention has been distracted.[11] The wounded man continues to limp with the affected leg, the wound continues to bleed, and the electrical activity of the nervous system near the wound is what we would expect if there were pain. Considerations of this kind have led some writers, like David Armstrong, to say that we can make sense of, and even have some grounds for, the claim that unfelt pains can exist where the experiencer is distracted. Drugs may stop pain, whilst fear, excitement and pleasure may distract from it.[12]

Now one might attempt to give an answer by exploring what seems to be a connection between objectivity and certain spatial relations. The spatiality theory, which claims this connection as its main tenet may be stated as follows.[13]

There is a familiar sense in which certain parts of our bodies are where our experiences of objectively existing things take place. I can see from a place on the front of my head, and my hearing is located at the sides. Places on the surface of my body are where I feel objects that come into contact with it, and whatever the place is inside my body, I normally feel any object that is passing through it. These parts of the body, and in the last case the whole of its interior, might be called the experiencing places for the modes of experience concerned. In many cases, of course, an experiencing place is also the site of the sensory organ or organs which enable the experiencer to experience.

For any mode of experience, an object may be spatially so related to the appropriate experiencing place that we have no experience of it. An object may be too far away from the viewpoint on my body for me to see it, something may come between them, the object may be too far to one side or the other or it may be set against a background so similar to it that it blends invisibly with that background. Similarly, the object may be unfelt because it is outside my body and not in contact with any part of its surface. Certain types of spatial relationship, therefore, enable us to explain why it is that an object can exist without being experienced. And we can point to the relevant changes in these relationships to explain why it is that our experience of the object should cease and then be resumed. It is at least a necessary condition, the spatiality theory continues, of something's being an objective particular, that it should be able to enter into spatial relationships of this kind. Only if, therefore, we can first explain interruptions in our experience of an object in this way, can we also explain interruptions in our experience of it in terms of other factors like damage to a sensory organ or to parts of the nervous system, or lapses of attention.

Because these spatial relations are said to hold between the objects experienced and experiencing places, the spatiality theory seems to be able to offer an account of the objective status of the body and its various parts. Much of one's

body can enter and leave one's own visual field. One part of the body can touch another and then move away. That the whole body is objective is something we seem to be able to establish at least tactually by providing evidence of objectivity part by part. Matters would be different, of course, if the spatial relations were thought to hold between the objects experienced and the experiencer in his entirety. The part by part procedure would now be impossible since parts of the body can change their spatial relations only to other parts and not to the whole which includes them.[14]

Now pains as candidate objective particulars do not appear to satisfy the spatiality theory outlined above. If the theory is correct, then pains must be able to exist outside the appropriate experiencing place, which in standard cases is the experiencer's body. And this they seem to be unable to do. There are, admittedly, some non standard cases, but the results they yield are no different. Phantom limb pains, for example, can exist outside the body where some part of the body seems to the experiencer to be. But even if we now take the experiencing place to extend beyond the physical body in this way, much the same objection will be raised. Unless a pain can exist outside the experiencing place as newly defined, it cannot satisfy the spatiality theory. Conversely, the experiencing place for pain might not be co-extensive with the whole of the body's interior. If, that is, the experiencer could feel nothing in certain parts of his body, then we might have to speak of one or more experiencing places separated by parts of the body lacking sensation. Once again, however, unless a pain could exist outside such an experiencing place, even if it were still inside the body, it would fail to satisfy the spatiality theory. In cases like the last one, the spatiality theorist would allow an unanaesthetized patient to claim that he no longer feels the surgeon's knife because it has moved within his body from a part with sensation to a part without it, like a part consisting of an inorganic implant of some kind. But the patient would not be allowed to claim the same for a pain. Unlike the knife, a pain could not be said to move into one of the intervening parts of the body, and to continue to exist there unfelt.[15]

The spatiality theory, however, can be challenged, and it can be challenged on the basis of a further mode of experience, namely inner experience. If it moves, I can feel my arm moving. If they are cold, I can feel how cold my legs are. If sensation returns to one of my limbs after a period of numbness, I start to be aware of that limb again. In this mode my body seems to be experienced as a something objective. My experience of it, when it takes this form, can be interrupted, and the cause of the interruption can be, among other things, a lapse of attention. I might concentrate so much on performing some task with my hands, for example, that I cease to be aware, in this sense, of other parts of my body.

But the spatiality theory seems to be unable to account for the body's objective status with regard to inner experience. For nothing seems to count as, say, a limb's being spatially so related to the appropriate experiencing place that we have no inner sensation of it. The appropriate experiencing place for a limb for this kind of feeling is where the limb is. Where it is, is where the inner experi-

ence of it takes place. If the limb moves, the experiencing place will move with it. It seems impossible, therefore, to explain why we no longer feel the limb by saying that its spatial relationship to the required experiencing place has changed. And the same, of course, applies to the body as a whole. Nothing could count as its changing its spatial relationship to the place where our inner experience of it occurs.

It is not enough to reply that we account for the objective status of the body in terms of vision and touch, for however fanciful the supposition might be, someone might lack all modes of experience except inner experience and still gain some notion of his body as an objective particular. Nor could we easily argue that the appropriate experiencing place might be identified in some way with part of an unembodied non-physical experiencer since it would have to be proved that the notion of an entirely non-physical self, whether spatial or not, is coherent.

We began with the idea that an attentional element is already present in experience before we perform acts like paying attention. When this element is no longer present, the experience ceases. This much seems clear. But what it is that enables an object to survive attentional lapses remains obscure. If the spatiality theory looks attractive because it excludes pains, it is nevertheless dubious because, for one kind of experience at least, and for not dissimilar reasons, it also excludes our own bodies.

Notes

1 Versions of this paper were given at the Australian Association of Philosophy Annual Conference at Monash University, 1986, and to seminars at the Universities of Hong Kong and Sussex. I am grateful for their comments to all those who took part in the discussions.

2 The reverse, however, does not seem to hold. Without realizing it, one may be able to notice something which one doesn't experience. An example of this subliminal form of attention may be provided by the phenomenon of dichotic listening. See for eg. Alan Garnham, *Psycholinguistics Central Topics*, London: Methuen, 1985, p.65.

3 John Passmore's account of Brentano seems to present him in this light. In explaining Brentano's claim that we perceive but do not observe our own mental acts, Passmore writes "Thus, for example, we cannot hear a sound, Brentano argues, without being conscious not only of the sound itself, but also of the *act* of hearing it." (Italics mine). See his *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, London: Penguin, 1968, p.177.

4 That our attention may be on what we are not currently experiencing is a claim also made by Alan R. White. See his *The Philosophy of Mind*, New York: Random House, 1967, p.63. But he seems to restrict the claim to the notion of attention in the activity form only, whereas I shall argue that it applies to the passive forms as well.

5 For a classic account of some of the issues, see H.P. Grice, "Meaning", *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 66 (1957), pp.377-88.

6 Embedded sentences may yield some examples of the opposite. Let us suppose that the referring expression at the beginning of an embedded sentence in fact fails of reference. It might still be argued that it has an attention directing function. Thus in "Galilio believed that Venus is a planet", the referring expression "Venus" might be thought to direct the reader's attention on to the planet. Similarly in "I think that the man in black is the thief", the expression "the man in black" might be credited with the function of directing attention on to the suspect. It would be very odd to suppose, incidentally, that the referring expression directed the reader's attention Fregeanly on to the sense it has in direct speech.

7 Ibid., p.57-58.

8 For a detailed discussion of the arguments about these and related theories, see Frank Jackson, *Perception. A representative theory*, Cambridge: University Press, 1977, Ch. 3. I am indebted to this account for most of the points not concerning attention.

9 A theory with some similarities to this is adopted by D.M. Armstrong with regard to after images. An after image he writes is an intentional object like the object of a false belief. On the other hand, he also seems to be inclined to the state theory since he denies "that there are such *things* as after images". How this can be reconciled with the view that after images are intentional *objects* is not explained. See D.M. Armstrong and Norman Malcolm *Consciousness and Causality*, Blackwell, 1984, p.130.

10 The same point can be made about the parts, properties and aspects of objects as well as the objects themselves.

11 See, for example, the debate between Armstrong and Malcolm in *Causality and Consciousness*, especially pp. 10-16 and pp. 124-135.

12 Armstrong's own example is of the dentist using an anesthetic to stop the pain and music to distract from it. Ibid., p. 124.

13 A version of the spatiality theory is explored in P. F. Strawson *Individuals*, London: Methuen, 1959, Ch.2. The theory's more remote ancestry is clearly Kantian.

14 P.F. Strawson, for example, in speaking of sounds seems to believe that it is distance from the experiencer that enables sounds to exist unperceived. "Thus the most familiar and easily understood sense in which there exist sounds that I do not now hear is this: that there are places at which those sounds are audible, but these are places which I am not now stationed." More generally, one moves, as an object oneself, through a spatial system of objects only some of which are observable at any one time. In such a system there is somewhere for the unobserved objects to be. Ibid., p. 74. But where in this theory, could the observer or any bodily part of him be if he, or it, were to be inaccessible to his own observation?

15 There is a further possibility, intermediate between these two, which, arguably, the theorist might also allow. Objects of some kind might be capable of existing outside their experiencing places in the body, and yet be conceptually incapable of existing outside the body and the body image.