INTENTIONALITY WITHOUT REPRESENTATIONS

HEIDEGGER'S ACCOUNT OF PERCEPTION

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Most commentators would agree that Heidegger is what one might call an "antirepresentationalist" about intentional states, including perception.[1] This is a view which Carleton B. Christensen recently has attacked.[2] The attack centers on the fact that Heidegger's account of intentionality incorporates perception, which is tacitly assumed to be representational in character. In this essay, I show this assumption to be unwarranted. Heidegger's phenomenology of perception is remarkable for the precise reason that it denies that perception can, in general, be understood as a representational state in any straightforward sense.

But because the terms "representation" and "representational" are notoriously obscure,[3] very little is actually resolved about Heidegger's views by looking for instances where he uses those terms.[4] And because it is not clear from the terms themselves what exactly is meant in calling someone a "representationalist," we will have profited very little if the conclusion of the analysis goes no further than deciding whether we should label Heidegger (or any philosopher, for that matter) a "representationalist" or "anti-representationalist." Instead of embroiling myself in such name-calling, I hope to use this essay to get clearer about the matter at hand—namely, the right way to conceive of the relationship between acting agents and the world in which they live. I will thus begin by addressing briefly one sort of consideration that has led philosophers to think of human intentionality as mediated by mental representations. I will then address Heidegger's phenomenology of perception in light of some common views of representation, and show that Heidegger's phenomenology supports a view on which the fundamental forms of intentional comportment are, at least for the most part, unmediated by mental representations. To think of perception as representational is, according to Heidegger, the result of erroneously reading the structure of those activities that are representationally mediated into the structure of human comportment as a whole.

Intentionality and Representations

At issue in representationalist theories of intentional states is the proper way to understand human activity. One way to account for the difference between the way we humans relate to the world around us and the way animals, plants, or inanimate objects relate to their " worlds" is to say that human receptivity to and interaction with the world has a meaningful content, while non-humans' responses to the world are purely causal in nature.[5] Human comportment, in contrast to non-intentional forms of behavior, seems to be mediated in such a manner that we relate to things and the world around us in ways both narrower and broader than what could be expected given a purely causal interaction. For instance, causal relations hold regardless of the description applied to the relata. But intentional relations are "narrower" than causal relations in the sense that one can relate intentionally to things under one description but not under another. And in other cases, it is possible to relate intentionally to more than is given causally. For instance, I can have beliefs about things which not only are not present, but in fact do not even exist. Or I can relate to something as more than is, strictly speaking, present—as when I see something as a member of a class or type. In short, what distinguishes human intentional states from a non-intentional mode of reacting to the world is that they have a content—a content which is in principle independent of the state of the environing world, causally defined.

It is in explaining the contentfulness of intentional states and actions that mental representations are typically introduced. Our receptivity to the world has a determinate content, according to representationalist accounts, because it is mediated or constituted by mental representations, in virtue of which an experience can refer to something outside of the experiencing agent. And we are able to act intentionally because we represent the world in such a way that it can enter meaningfully into our thoughts, desires, or beliefs.

In its most robust form, representationalism argues for a three term relation holding between an agent and a representation on the one hand, and the representation and the object (or the state of affairs) which it represents on the other. According to such theories, one's mind is actually directed toward a mental representation of its object, rather than the object itself. Heidegger, however, explicitly dismisses a robustly representational account as phenomenologically unsupported. In our everyday perception, at least, we are never directed toward representations, but rather toward the objects which we perceive.[6]

Of course, Heidegger's opposition to robust representationalism does not prove that he is an antirepresentationalist. One can accept that in perception we are directed toward objects rather than mental representations, and still believe that there is an inescapably representational component to perception. Put roughly, this "minimally" representational argument holds that the aspectual directedness-toward (i.e., intentionality) of perception is made possible by mental representations which determine the content of the intentional state. For instance, one might hold that it is only possible for me to see a chair as a chair because I have mental representations which fix the content of my perception—perhaps the concept "chair" or beliefs about chairs.[7]

For Searle, for instance, to say that perception is a subclass of representational intentionality is to say that perceptual experience has a propositional content which directs us toward objects in the world, and in virtue of which our perception has conditions of satisfaction.[8] Thus, both Searle and Heidegger would agree in denying that perception is robustly representational; the object of perception for both is an object or state of affairs in the world. But that does not resolve the question whether Heidegger would accept a Searlean account of perception as consisting of a perceptual experience with a determinate propositional content which fixes the satisfaction conditions of the perception.

Christensen, at least, claims that Heidegger's account of intentionality should be understood as representational in just such a minimal sense. "Heidegger," he claims, "in fact endorses the traditional idea that the subject always relates to the world via representations."[9] Because intentional action relies on perception, Christensen reasons, and because he believes perception is necessarily representational, Christensen concludes that Heidegger must have a minimally representational account of intentionality. Indeed, Christensen considers it "absurd" to say that perception is non-representational as long as representations are understood in a Searlean way.[10]

But is it really the case that perception requires us to have a mental representation of the world or things in it? Now, it seems to be the case that Christensen does not really grasp what is at issue in Dreyfus's denial that perception is mediated by mental representations. He thus thinks, for instance, that Dreyfus would deny that "in any familiar environment we are always seeing the familiar things around us as a group, as a diffuse and inexplicit totality," because he seems to think that Dreyfus must deny we ever see or hear or otherwise perceive anything when circumspectively coping.[11] But of course, it is not our seeing, but the representationalist account of our seeing that Dreyfus challenges. Dreyfus explains:

> Heidegger's objection is not that the theory of intentionality inserts a picture in the mind that comes between the subject and the object. Husserl explicitly rejected this view. To understand the issue focused around intentionality, one must know that early Husserl, like Searle, has a minimal notion of representation and intentional content. The mind is not directed toward some special object in it that in turn mirrors an object in the world. Speaking of intentional content is meant to capture the fact that perceptions, beliefs, desires, intentions, and so on can all be directed toward the same object under the same aspect. . . . Heidegger sees, however, that such an account . . . allows the separation of an intentional content that is mental from an objective world that may or may

> not be the way the mind takes it to be. . . . Heidegger accepts intentional directedness as essential to human activity, but he denies that intentionality is mental.[12]

In this essay I shall, in agreement with Dreyfus, demonstrate that Heidegger's view is that there is often—perhaps in the majority of our activities—no role to be played by mental representations (of the Searlean kind) in our intentional comportment with the world in general, and in perception in particular. To support my argument, I will need to show how Heidegger presents a view of perception in which perception has an intentional content, but that in many cases it has it without any mental intermediaries participating in determining that content.

Heidegger's Phenomenology of Perception

Heidegger's phenomenology of perception provides several reasons for denying that intentional states are representationally mediated. Because of space constraints, I will here focus on only one of these reasons.[13] In particular, Heidegger argues on the basis of his phenomenology of everyday perception that intentional states are not propositionally structured. If the content of intentional states were fixed via mental representations, they would bear the propositional structure that mental representations do. The fact that, in many instances, they lack such a structure gives one reason to believe that intentional states are not representationally constituted.

Heidegger's phenomenology of perception begins from the way perception is incorporated into our everyday, non-reflective practical comportment with the objects and people around us. We do not ordinarily just see or hear or otherwise perceive things for perception's sake, but rather we perceive as part of the activities in which we find ourselves engrossed. Consequently our perception is subordinated to and structured by the requirements of our practical comportment.

This is exemplified by the way we see things like signs. Heidegger notes that "in perceiving this sign, insofar as I encounter it environmentally, I draw from its indication my particular comportment at the time. I draw from the sign the manner in which I go and indeed have to go my own way." He goes on to explain that the sign "conveys no information"; rather, our seeing it reorients our active involvement in the world.[14] Indeed, there is an important sense in which, at least when our practical engagement in the world is functioning well, we do not "see" particular things at all. We see the whole at once, as standing in a meaningful and ordered relationship to us, which "is expressly visible to us for the most part only in excerpts." Furthermore, what is expressly visible "constantly varies in range, expanding or contracting."[15]

The mistake that is often made is to take as a paradigm case of perception those instances in which something is "thematically" or expressly visible. Indeed, Heidegger objects to Husserl's analysis of perception through a series of reductions on the grounds that, by doing this, " a specifically theoretical apprehension of the thing is put forward as an exemplary mode of being-in-the-world, instead of phenomenologically placing oneself directly in the current and the continuity of access of the everyday preoccupation with things."[16] In thematic perception, Heidegger acknowledges, what is perceived has a sufficiently determinate content that we are able to predicate something of something, thus entailing that what is given in thematic perception is articulated in ways which can be captured propositionally.[17] But the problem with taking thematic perception as exemplary of perception in general is that, according to Heidegger, the act of focusing our attention on something changes the nature of our experience and, in the process, first gives our experience a determinate content. On Heidegger's account, then, we first bring mental representations into existence—we make for a determinate content—in thematic perception.[18] Thus, as Heidegger describes it, it is certainly possible to perceive individual things as under a description. But that possibility should not be made the standard case—indeed, it is a mode of perception derived from our ordinary way of seeing the whole contexture at once.

If we stay with the whole which is "primarily" given to us in perception, rather than on the way things appear when we start paying attention to our perception of them, we discover that most of what we "see" is presented to us in such a way that it "stands at first, completely unobtrusive and unthought." Heidegger illustrates this point through the example of walking into a room:

> When we enter here through the door, we do not apprehend the seats, and the same holds for the doorknob. Nevertheless, they are there in this peculiar way: we go by them circumspectly, avoid them circumspectly, stumble against them, and the like. Stairs, corridors, windows, chair and bench, blackboard, and much more are not given thematically.[19]

What a phenomenology of everyday perception shows is that in walking into a familiar room, for instance, I am not for the most part explicitly aware of a plethora of features relevant to moving about. Indeed, I am ordinarily so little aware of the things I see and hear in the room that I can find myself entirely absorbed in thinking about the lecture on Aristotle that I must deliver that afternoon.

Every once in a while, something interrupts the ordinary flow of perception and response. In such instances, we can "thematically" see things which a moment before were there in the perceptual field but of which we were not aware. A chilly draft blows across my face, for instance, and I suddenly notice that the window through which I have been gazing is open. As the explicit awareness reorients me to my world, I will ordinarily activate a whole new set of coping practices, thereby allowing the suddenly conspicuous things to sink back into an unobtrusive and unthought presence. According to Heidegger, then, in our everyday perception of things, we do not "see" this or that thing (or state of affairs) under this or that description, but a whole context of things at once. Of course, "thematic" perception of particular things and states of affairs—perception in which we can give an explicit description of what confronts us—is always a possibility. But that possibility should not be made the standard case—indeed, it is a mode of perception derived from our ordinary way of seeing the whole contexture at once.

At the same time, it would be wrong to conclude that what we perceive in perception is an unstructured, confused, disorderly mess. What we see is seen, "not as a jumbled heap of things but as an environs, a surroundings, which contains within itself a closed, intelligible contexture."[20] Even the simplest perception has, then, an extremely complicated structure built into it and constituting it.

But where does this structure come from? The minimally representationlist view accounts for the uniquely intentional shape of perceptions by seeing them as constituted by mental representations. But this is not how Heidegger accounts for intentionality. Indeed, he is critical of "minimal" representationalists for remaining under the sway of a mentalistic and subjectivistic account of the way intentionality is constituted, thus preserving "the old mythology of an intellect which glues and rigs together the world's matter with its own forms."[21] In contrast to what one would expect based on such a subjectivistic view of perception, we ordinarily experience ourselves as already being in an orderly, meaningful, and objective world. But the orderliness of our world does not mean that our perception is already propositionally determined, that is to say, that it has a determinate content:

> How do the beings with which we dwell show themselves to us primarily and for the most part? Sitting here in the auditorium, we do not in fact apprehend walls—not unless we are getting bored. Nevertheless, the walls are already present even before we think them as objects. Much else also gives itself to us before any determining of it by thought.[22]

To say that what is given in perception is unthought, Heidegger explains, means that it is "not thematically apprehended for deliberate thinking about things."[23] What we find, then, is not some mental representation shaping our responses to the world by subjectively filtering or veiling it, but rather we discover that our perceptions are intentionally shaped in their very constitution by our understanding of being—that is, our way of making our way about in the world. In this account, perception is primarily articulated along the lines of the features relevant to our ordinary concerned dealing with things, which are encountered as having a context of involvements and references. In virtue of our skillful knowing-how to be in our world, rather than via any cognitive processes, the world itself, without any mental mediation, directly calls forth our intentionally-shaped response. And because the world itself calls out of us the response for which our understanding of being predisposes us, there is no more justification for adverting to the existence of a mental representation in explaining that activity than we would need to attribute to a thermometer beliefs about temperature.[24]

In summary, Heidegger's anti-representationalism is found in his insistence that what is ordinarily given in perception is not propositionally articulated. This is because, while it has a content, our perception has its content in virtue of a practical engagement in the world, a way of being which can in no wise be representationally specified.

Perceptions and Propositions

As we have seen, Heidegger argues that it is only in certain derived circumstances that our perception has a "predicative" or propositional content. In the course of our everyday going about our affairs, in contrast, there is no proposition or set of propositions adequate to exhaustively expressing what we see. I believe that the temptation to see perception as propositional, in the face of our everyday experience of perception, arises in the following way. Because our perceptions are contentful in the ways outlined above, and because they can enter into logical relations with our propositional attitudes, it seems that perceptions must bear an inherently propositional structure.[25] The fact that there is no way of saying exhaustively what we see is no deterrent; one merely insists that what I perceive when I see, for instance, a chair can be fully captured by a proposition or a (perhaps indefinite) number of propositions about the chair.[26]

Although this claim is theory driven, there is an important kernel of truth here. If Heidegger is successfully to deny that perceptions are propositionally structured, he must give some account of how it is that perceptions can enter into logical relations with propositional states (as when, for instance, my seeing the chair supports my belief that there is a chair in the room).

The ability of perceptions to enter into logical relations with our propositional attitudes is, on Heidegger's view, a consequence of the fact that both our propositional attitudes and our perceptions are articulated by a pre-propositional mode of being in a world. In the place of mental representations, then, Heidegger's phenomenology of perception leads him to see the directedness of intentionality as being secured by non-cognitive forms of comportment. Instead of being representationally shaped, our intentions have their directedness in virtue of our practical engagement in a world. It is this feature of our perception which allows us to see how it is that, while perception is not ordinarily propositionally structured, we can in moments of reflection form propositions about what we perceive in perception.

This ability is a result of the fact that it is precisely to the practically referential structure implicit in all human comportment that words can "accrue." So long as things are unproblematically functioning within that structure, Heidegger explains, they "constantly step back into the referential totality or, more properly stated, in the immediacy of everyday occupation they never even first step out of it. . . . Things recede into relations, they do not obtrude themselves, in order thus to be there for concern."[27] What is perceived in the most fundamental sense is, then, the thing itself as it is in Dasein's world of involvements—a thing much broader and more indefinite than any proposition or set of propositions could capture. A representationalist view, according to which perceptions have a propositional structure in the first instance is thus, Heidegger believes, much too narrow. Heidegger claims that what we take in perception does not require the mediation of representations because we see the situation as already structured "in an adequately and sufficiently cultivated form of simple finding."[28] As Heidegger's discussion of interpretation in Being and Time makes clear, this propositional structure is grounded not in the representations that Dasein brings to perceptions, but rather in the structure articulated by Dasein's concernful interaction with things.[29]

In other words, the practical articulation of our receptivity to the world draws the joints along which we are able to break ourselves out of the ordinary course of dealing with the world in order to merely stare at something, to observe its features or properties. A propositional awareness of things is thus only available on the basis of "a deficiency in our having-to-do with the world concernfully." Heidegger explains:

> When concern holds back from any kind of producing, manipulating, and the like, it puts itself into what is now the sole remaining mode of Being-in, the mode of just tarrying alongside.... In this kind of "dwelling" as a holding-oneself-back from any manipulation or utilization, the perception of the present-at-hand is consummated. Perception is consummated when one addresses oneself to something as something and discusses it as such.... What is thus perceived and made determinate can be expressed in propositions, and can be retained and preserved as what has thus been asserted.[30]

But breaking out of our involvements in this way, Heidegger argues, causes what is present in perception to change along with the mode of acting.

In order to form propositions about what we see in our natural, simple awareness or cognizance of things, the practical articulations must be "read off" the undifferentiated whole we ordinarily see. In this "reading off," however, a transformation occurs in the nature of our perception of the object. As Heidegger explains in Being and Time, focusing on some particular object requires a "restriction of our view"—a restriction by which "that which is already manifest may be made explicitly manifest in its definite character." In the same passage, he refers to this restriction of our view as a "dimming down."[31] It is a dimming down or restriction because in focusing on some particular object our perception undergoes a "modification"—our way of dealing with the object "no longer reaches out into a totality of involvements." It is only at this point, Heidegger explains, that we have "any access to properties or the like."[32] Here, then, we see Heidegger advocating what Dreyfus has called the "intermittency" of intentional states, by which he means that only intermittently does our intentional comportment toward things have a propositional structure.

Conclusion

In summary, for Heidegger, mental representations play no role in many fundamental forms of intentional comportment. Intentional states and "experiences" consist in a simple directedness-toward objects in the world, and directedness is not shaped by mental representations, individuatable in isolation from the world, and bearing a propositional structure. Instead, it is founded on our skillful comportment in a world structured by our understanding of Being. If perception is mediated by anything, it is by our practical involvements—involvements which meaningfully articulate the world.[33]

ENDNOTES

1. See, for instance, Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991); Frederick A. Olafson, Heidegger and the Philosophy of Mind (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).
2. See Carleton B. Christensen, "Heidegger's Representationalism," The Review of Metaphysics 51 (September 1997): 77–103; "Getting Heidegger off the West Coast," Inquiry 41 (March 1998): 65–87.
3. "There is probably no more abused a term in the history of philosophy," John Searle has observed, "than 'representation.'" *Intentionality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 11.
4. Although it is probably significant that he never seems to use the terms in describing his own view of perception.
5. Of course, many would deny that there is any essential difference between human and other ways of relating to the environment. I will not try to argue for such a difference here; this paper assumes that they are different, and is concerned with how best to account for that difference.
6. See Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, revised edition, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 63.

See also Martin Heidegger, *The History of the Concept of Time*, trans. Theodore Kisiel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985): "in the case of a representation on the level of simple perception a representation is not represented; I simply see the chair" (p. 35); "I see no 'representations' of the chair, register no image of the chair, sense no sensations of the chair. I simply see it—it itself" (p. 37)

7. I should note here that I am using the term "representation" in a specific sense. There are ways to speak of perceptual experiences as representations without importing any particular claims about the role of mental representations such as concepts in mediating the experience. I am not taking issue here with such views.
8. John Searle, *Intentionality*, especially chapter 2.
9. "Heidegger's Representationalism," p. 79.
10. Christensen, "Getting Heidegger Off the West Coast," p. 68.
11. Ibid., p. 76.
12. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, pp. 50–51.
13. One could also point to Heidegger's argument that intentions are not individualistic (in Burge's sense of the term). If intentional states had their content fixed by other mental, representational states, then it would seem possible for them to have their content independently of the world. But, he argues, they cannot. This thus gives one some reason to believe that intentions are not representationally mediated.

    Another basis for Heidegger's anti-representationalism is his claim that intentional states are generally not explicitly present to the acting agent. The fact that we experience "transparent" intentionality differently than intentional states which are present to the "mind" of the agent—states that are present in virtue of their being representationally mediated—gives one some reason to believe that intentional states of which we lack an explicit awareness are not representationally constituted.
14. Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time*, p. 205.
15. Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, p. 163.
16. Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time*, p. 187.
17. Ibid., p. 65.
18. See, e.g., ibid., p. 163.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid..
21. Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time*, p. 70.
22. Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, pp. 162-63.
23. Ibid., p. 163.
24. "When all epistemological assumptions are set aside, it becomes clear that comportment itself . . . is in its very structure a directing-itself-toward. It is not the case that at first only a psychic process occurs as a nonintentional state (complex of sensations, memory relations, mental image and thought processes through which an image is evoked, where one then asks whether something corresponds to it) and subsequently becomes intentional in certain instances. Rather, the very being of comporting is a directing itself-toward. Intentionality is not a relationship to the non-experiential added to experiences, occasionally present along with them. Rather, the lived experiences themselves are as such intentional. This is our first specification, perhaps still quite empty, but already important enough to provide the footing for holding metaphysical prejudices at bay" (ibid., pp. 31–32). Heidegger's view avoids a collapse into a reductive naturalism, however, because unlike the thermometer, we have an understanding of being which tunes us intentionally, thus meaning that our way of being in the world is not simply a matter of causal interactions with the things around us. Obviously, a great deal more would need to be said to fend off the threat of naturalism.
25. See, for example, John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), especially Lecture III: "Non-Conceptual Content."
26. Searle, for instance, insists that "the content of the visual experience, like the content of the belief, is always equivalent to a whole proposition. Visual experience is never simply of an object, but rather it must always be that such and such is the case" (*Intentionality*, p. 40).
27. Heidegger, *The History of the Concept of Time*, p. 187.
28. Ibid., p. 40.
29. For a more complete discussion, see my "Heidegger and Davidson on the Conditions of Truth," *Monist* 82 (forthcoming April 1999).

30. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), pp. 88–89.

31. Ibid., p. 197.

32. Ibid., p. 200.

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