

A NOTE ON THE INTENTIONALITY OF FEAR

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I

In # 476 of his *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein says:

We should distinguish between the object of fear and the cause of fear. Thus a face which inspires fear or delight (the object of fear or delight), is not on that account its cause, but — one might say — its target.

Wittgenstein thus sees fear as intentional, i.e., it is of an object.

In # 473 of the same work he says:

The belief that fire will burn me is of the same kind as the fear that it will burn me.

In this case too, we can see that Wittgenstein deals with fear as an intentional state. He equates it with belief, which is a paradigm case of an intentional state. In his example, the belief and the fear share content. This content (that fire will burn the subject), referring to a state of affairs in the world, external to the subject's mind, is what makes these belief and fear intentional states, and is what makes them the intentional states that they are. Thus, according to Wittgenstein, fear is intentional in the same way as belief is intentional. That is, none is parasitic upon the other for its intentionality. This is the point in asserting them to belong to the same kind while emphasizing their equal intentional content.

Searle also sees fear as intentional. A conscious fear of snakes is one

of his examples of intentional states. While according to Searle fear is always intentional (and it always makes sense to ask “What is my fear about? What is my fear of?”), only some forms of anxiety are intentional — e.g., where one is anxious at the prospects of such and such (‘directed’ cases of anxiety), whereas other forms of anxiety are not intentional — e.g., where one is simply anxious, without being anxious about anything (‘undirected’ cases of anxiety). (See *Intentionality*, pp. 1-2).

I would like to argue against both Searle and Wittgenstein. I would like to argue that fear (as well as anxiety) is never intentional, and thus the distinction between the object and cause of fear cannot stand as it is.

First, I shall sketch an alternative to the intentionalistic view of fear. Then, in the light of this alternative, I shall try to show the unreasonableness of the intentionalistic view of fear.

II

Fear, in my opinion, is a sensation. As such, it has no content, and having no content, it has no intentional object. If so, there is of course no distinction between the object and cause of fear.

Arguing for this view, I must now give an alternative account for the alleged examples of the intentionality of fear, such as Searle’s example of the conscious fear of snakes, and Wittgenstein’s example of the fear that the fire will burn the subject. My account has to deal also with the alleged distinction between the object and cause of fear. Here it is.

In cases such as that of a conscious fear of snakes, snakes are not the objects (i.e., the intentional objects) of fear. They are its causes. Tom’s now having a fear of snakes is nothing but Tom’s now having a sensation of fear, a sensation that is caused by the snakes he is seeing or hearing or thinking to lie behind the bush, etc. That is, the snakes cause Tom, somehow, to have the sensation of fear. And Tom’s disposition to have a fear of snakes is nothing but Tom’s disposition to have a sensation of fear whenever he sees snakes, or hears them, etc. That is, Tom is such that snakes are likely to cause him to have sensations of fear. Under all these interpretations the ‘of’ in the phrase ‘a conscious fear of snakes’ is not the ‘of’ of intentionality (to use Searle’s own expression), and thus there are no intentional objects corresponding to the mental state which this phrase refers to. Snakes cause Tom to have sensations of fear exactly

as they can cause him to have headaches, and as snakes are not the intentional objects of headaches, they are not the intentional objects of fears.

Some of the things we seem to fear of do not exist. For example, I can fear of the snakes I think to lie behind the bush, or of God, when actually there are no snakes behind the bush and there is no such thing as God. It might seem that a causal theory of fear cannot account for such cases. In every case of a causal relation, one might object, the cause (as well as the effect) must exist. There cannot be any causal efficiency of a 'non-existing entity'. Intentionalistic theories, on the other hand, can account quite easily for cases of 'non-existing objects'. For in order to form part of a mental content, 'objects' need not necessarily exist. As a matter of fact, Brentano himself thought that what characterizes intentional relations is precisely the fact that their (intentional) objects need not necessarily exist (see *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, pp. 271-272). Do we have, then, to abandon the causal account of fear in favour of the intentionalistic account?

I don't think we have. Indeed, the claim that causes must exist is unobjectionable. Yet, there can be a sense to talk of 'fears of snakes' even in those cases where no snakes exist. Whether there are snakes behind the bush or not, my thinking that there are, or my visualization of snakes, etc., are what cause in me, ultimately, the sensations of fear. In cases where such thinking or visualization are veridical, they are links in the causal chains emerging from the 'external' snakes. But those thinking or visualization can also be non-veridical, and occur without there existing snakes at all. Their being non-veridical, however, do not prevent the thinking or the visualization from causing sensations of fear. And these sensations can be treated as 'fear of snakes' in the sense that they are caused by, say, beliefs of snakes (where the 'of' is the 'of' of intentionality). In such cases, there are intentional objects (whether they exist or not), but they are the intentional objects of the beliefs in question, not of fears.

The above sentences dealt with 'objectual' fear. What about 'propositional' fear? What about the case where one fears that such and such will be the case, like John's fear that the fire will burn him? It seems that here we have an instance of intentional fear whose intentional 'object' is the state of affairs that the fire is burning John. That is, propositional fear, like any other propositional attitude, is intentional in virtue of its proposi-

tional content. However, here too we can give an alternative account. In my opinion, when John fears that the fire will burn him, he is imagining or thinking that (there are some prospects that) the fire will burn him, and this thought (or imagination) is causing in him a sensation of fear. (We can also say that one is having the fear that such and such will be the case, when one simply does not want it to be the case. But this is a different use of 'fear'.) In all these cases, what is intentional is not the fear, but another mental state (a propositional attitude) which accompanies the fear. Fear itself is not a propositional attitude.¹

According to my view, then, what seems to be the intentional object of fear, is nothing but its cause. If so, what can be said about Wittgenstein's distinction between the object and cause of fear? I believe we can view that distinction as one between two kinds of causes, a remote one and a close one. Let's suppose that the presence of my uncle causes me to have a fear which is referred to as 'a fear of my teacher'. It can be a fear of my teacher, though it is caused by the presence of my uncle, since the presence of my uncle causes me a thought about my teacher, which in turn causes me to have a sensation of fear. So my uncle (or its presence) is the remote cause of my fear, while my thought about my teacher is the close cause of it, and we take its intentional object to be what I fear of.²

In the case of perception the cause of the perceptual state is, 'on that account', its intentional object. But this is true only regarding perception. If a belief is caused by an object, it is not necessarily a belief about that object: objects of various kinds can cause us to have beliefs with various contents. So to say that a fear is caused by an object is not to say that the object is the fear's intentional object.

I am aware that I might be blamed for confusing fear and anxiety (or something like this). One might claim that while anxiety is indeed not intentional, fear is, and my analysis of fear is really an analysis of anxiety (or of something like this).

Such an objection must be based on the assumption that fear and anxiety are two different kinds of mental states. Anxiety, according to such an assumption, must be a pure undirected sensation. In other words, it is very close in nature to (if not identical with) that mental state I was referring to as the sensation of fear. If so, what is the other mental state we refer to as 'fear'? That sensation of fear (that anxiety?) was not the subject matter of my above analysis, but what (or one of the elements

that) that analysis reached at. It is an analysis of what seems to be an intentional state, of a 'directed' fear, and it analyzed this phenomenon as involving a sensation and its causes (among them there can be an external object, and there is at least one accompanying intentional state). If 'anxiety' is supposed to refer to a pure undirected sensation (and not also to its causes), it couldn't be the subject of such an analysis. Thus, the question remains whether my analysis is the correct one. I hope I succeeded in showing it is a possible and reasonable account of fear. I will try now to convince it is a necessary one.

III

I think it is unquestionable that fear involves a sensation of a certain typical kind. If so, then 'fear' must refer either to a sensation, or to a sensation and another element (or some other elements). Now if 'fear' refers only to a sensation, and this fact alone does not convince one that it cannot be directed towards anything and therefore cannot be intentional, one at least must admit that a fear of snakes is a different sensation (and different as a sensation, in its sensuous character) from a fear of policemen. I hope this unreasonable conclusion will convince that if we treat fear as a sensation, we cannot see it as intentional.

Alternatively we can think of 'fear' as referring to a sensation and some other elements. Under this interpretation, the sensations of a fear of snakes and of a fear of policemen can be identical (and it may be that this sensation is very close in nature to, or even identical with, what is known as anxiety). But of course these two fears are different ones. Where does then the difference lie, if not in the sensations? Well, it may be the case that the two fears differ from each other in the accompanying beliefs of the undirected (identical) sensations. It may also be that they differ in their causes (causes which are not accompanying mental states). However, these two possibilities are precisely my non-intentionalistic interpretations of fear. That is, I have no argument with someone who claims that fear is intentional in virtue of an intentional accompanying belief. But that was not Wittgenstein's view. He saw the intentionality of the belief that fire will burn him and the intentionality of the fear that fire will burn him as independent on each other, and thus fear must be seen as intentional not in virtue of an intentional accompanying belief. Such

a view is the intentionalistic view of fear I argue against.

If we adopt, on the other hand, the view that the fear of snakes and the fear of policemen differ only in their causes (causes which are not accompanying mental states), then we cannot count fear as intentional in any sense.³

Thus, I cannot see any defensible account of fear according to which it is intentional. If so, the only reasonable account of the relation between fear and its object is the one according to which either the object is causally related to the fear, or it is intentionally related to another mental state which accompanies the fear (and this state can then be the cause of the fear).⁴

The intentionalistic view of fear cannot, I think, account for the fact that we are sometimes in an error regarding the things we fear of. For instance, I can think I fear of the policeman, when the case is that I fear of my mother. The possibility of such cases seems to conflict with the view that our beliefs about our own mental states are incorrigible. But there is a conflict here only if what we fear of is taken to be the intentional object of fear. That is, if it is taken to be determined by the content of fear. However, if what we fear of is not determined by the content of fear (which I deny to exist), but is the cause of fear (which can be an external object or an accompanying mental state), then no conflict arises, for no one claims that we cannot be in an error regarding the causes of our mental states. No doubt we can, and this is true even if these causes are themselves mental states of ours. Perhaps I cannot fail to recognize the mental states I have, but I can fail to notice that one of them is the cause of another.

If one takes it for granted that our beliefs regarding our mental states are incorrigible, and that we are sometimes in an error regarding the things we fear of, then one may find here an additional reason to abandon the intentionalistic view of fear in favour of the alternative I was suggesting here.^{5,6}

NOTES

1. Searle accepts that it is impossible to account for the intentionality of fear in terms of the intentionality of beliefs and desires. But nevertheless, he thinks, fear is intentional.

2. One who believes in unconscious thoughts can treat the fear in question as a teacher's fear even though I do not have any conscious intentional state directed towards my teacher.
3. It might be objected that my account is absurd, since in order to be consistent I must accept that it applies also to mental states of other kinds, such as love. However, I don't find this consequence absurd at all. It is plausible that the relation between a mental state of love and the beloved is similar to that between fear and the 'object' of fear, and the feeling of love isn't by itself directed at anything.
4. It is reasonable that even when a state of fear is causally related to its object, it is through the mediation of an intentional state which is intentionally related to the object. If so, 'a fear of' is always accompanied by an intentional state.
5. I owe this point to Marcelo Dascal.
6. According to externalist theories of content (that claim that contents of mental states are determined also by extra-mental facts), we are not incorrigible about the contents of our intentional states. But whether externalism is true or not, the mistake of my taking the policeman rather than my mother to be the object of my fear cannot be due (only) to the 'external' character of content. There is (also) a first person difference between the two beliefs about the object of fear that are involved here.

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