

Response to Christopher Tomaszewski's "Intentionality as Partial Identity"

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1. Introduction

Intentionality is a curious notion and so is partial identity; the latter is employed by Christopher Tomaszewski (henceforth, CT) in his paper to afford solutions to a wide array of different philosophical problems. The author's central thesis is that "intentionality is a kind of partial identity: that a given thought is about the object of that thought in virtue of the mind's coming to stand in a relation of partial identity to that object" (2017, p. 2).

CT thinks that his theory has three major virtues. The *first* virtue is that the appeal to partial identity supposedly fills the explanatory gap in the intentionality objection to materialist theories of the mind - something that immaterialists (or dualists) have failed to do so far. According to CT, the employment of the notion of partial identity can help here to defend the thesis of the irreducibility of intentionality to the purely physical (in John Searle's spirit), and to explain why it is in principle impossible for a *material* thing to be intentionally directed towards (or about) another thing; at the same time the argument is supposed to show why the mind must be immaterial. The *second* virtue of the theory of intentionality as partial identity is that it supposedly delivers a faithful interpretation of Franz Brentano's notion of "intentional in-existence". The third *virtue* of the theory is that intentionality as partial identity supposedly provides an explanation of the bidirectionality of causation holding between the mind and the object of its thought. Moreover, CT thinks that his theory can answer the critical question of how the intentional mind can be partially identical with objects that it is about but do not exist. And finally, the author claims that his proposal can also resolve problems arising from the fact that identity is necessary. While I won't have anything to say about the last claim or about the theory's third proclaimed virtue, I will deal with all other mentioned topics.

While there is quite a bit on the plate here, it is a tasty culinary experience. For if CT is right, the employment of the notion of partial identity is a very powerful tool (that even helps to afford a solution to the problem of *material constitution*). So, I shall take a closer look at its analysis - hopefully contributing to its enrichment. But before doing so, I want to make some remarks about the other central notion of CT's paper - which is intentionality.

2. Intentionality

To begin with, I think (contra to what CT, 2017, p. 1 suggests) that stones are *not about* stones, water is *not about* water, etc.; I just do not understand what these locutions are supposed to mean. Stones and water are physical phenomena that are *not about anything* (and thus also not exclusively about themselves).

But according to Brentano, all mental phenomena (and only they) are *about something*. Every mental phenomenon (or mental act) is primarily directed towards an object and *incidentally* directed towards itself as a secondary object (see Huemer, 2015). Brentano himself gives the classical formulation

of the intentionality thesis in his *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt* as follows:

Each of them [the mental phenomena] includes something as object within itself This intentional in-existence is exclusively characteristic of mental phenomena. No physical phenomenon exhibits anything like it. And so we can define the mental phenomena by saying that they are those phenomena which contain an object intentionally within themselves. (1874a, p. 125; my translation, my insertion in brackets)¹

What is particularly relevant for our discussion (and usually ignored by interpreters) is Brentano's footnote that is included in this passage; there he says:

Already Aristotle has spoken of this mental in-existence. In his books on the soul, he says that the sensed, as sensed, is *in* the sensing, that the sense *takes in* the sensed *without the matter*, that the *thought of* is *in* the thinking intellect. (1874a, p. 125; my translation, my italics)

This footnote makes it clear that Brentano's (1874a) thesis is really inspired by Aristotle, in particular, by Aristotle's doctrine of hylomorphism.² More important than to put the finger on a slight historical inaccuracy in CT's essay here, is to point out the origin of the basic intuition. The author's basic intuition, roughly speaking, is this: When the mind is intentionally directed towards an external object, it *takes in* a part of the object - its form, but not its matter. So, as CT remarks, the mind "can come to be partially identical with an external object through sharing its form" (2017, p. 8).

It should be noticed though that the later Brentano, becoming more and more worried about the so-called ontological status of *the intentional object*, *abandons* the thesis that *the intentional relation* is a *genuine* relation between a mental phenomenon and an *internal (or immanent) object* towards which it is directed. As the main editor of Brentano's work, Oskar Kraus, remarks in a comment on the intentionality thesis:

The way in which Br. here tries to render an account of the conscious mind by teaching "the mental in-existence of the object", taking up the Aristotelian tradition, he has later recognized to be imperfect. The so-called "in-existence of the object", the immanent objectivity, is not to be conceived as a *mode of being* of the thing in the conscious mind, but as an unclear description of the fact that I have something (a thing, reality, essence) as object, mentally deal with it, relate to it. (1874a, p. 269; my translation)³

These remarks reveal (contra to what CT says) that it can barely be the case that "whatever one takes intentionality to be, it is clearly a relation between the mind and the object of its thought, a relation between representer and represented" (2017, p. 6). Brentano's later view is that a mental phenomenon does *not* stand in a *genuine* relation to the object of its thought requiring the existence of both relata, but rather stands in a *quasi-relation* (i.e. is something he calls *Relativliches*) - so that only the thinker of something, but not the thing thought *about* has to exist.

If Brentano's later view does not strike the reader as a satisfactory solution to the problem of the ontological status of the intentional object, I ask what the alternative looks like. If intentionality is indeed a genuine relation between the mind and *the object of its thought*, the question emerges

what it is the thinker thinks about? Do I think of the internal object? Of the external object *via* the internal object? Or only of the external object?

For instance, when I am thinking about Vienna, I am not thinking about an internal (i.e. a mind-dependently existing) object, but about an external (i.e. a mind-independently existing) object; if intentional thought only consists in thought about internal objects, no two subjects can ever think about the same object. But if intentional thought consists in thought about external objects *via* thoughts about internal objects, we are threatened with a duplication of objects, because there is then both *the-thought-of-Vienna* and *the-Vienna-thought-of*, as it were. On the other hand, if I am thinking of Sherlock Holmes, I am clearly not thinking about an external object.

The bottom line of these remarks is that one should take Brentano more seriously when it comes to his denial of mental phenomena as standing in genuine relations to their *objects of thought*. Since one can be intentionally directed towards objects that exist, as well as towards objects that do not exist, it seems that intentionality *cannot* be adequately characterized as a *genuine* relation.⁴

3. Partial Identity

Partial identity is a rather curious notion which, however, does a lot of work in the author's essay. According to CT, "partial identity is the identity obtaining between two things which are totally identical in their parts" (2017, p. 6). To obtain a better understanding of this crucial notion, let me cite David Armstrong:

Two adjoining terrace houses are not identical, but they are not completely distinct from each other either. They are partially identical, and this partial identity takes the form of having a common part. Australia and New South Wales are not identical, but they are not completely distinct from each other. They are partially identical, and this partial identity takes the form of the whole-part "relation". (1978, p. 37)

The passage suggests that we distinguish between two cases of partial identity:

1. Partial identity of two things having a common part; or
2. Partial identity of two things standing in the whole-part relation.

But partial identity cannot just be the same relation as mereological overlap, for overlap includes cases of numerical identity (see Mantegani, 2013, p. 699).⁵ Trying to clarify things, let me propose the following definitions:⁶

- Equality: $EQ_{xy} =df P_{xy} \ \& \ P_{yx}$ ⁷
- Proper Parthood: $PP_{xy} =df P_{xy} \ \& \ x \neq y$ ⁸
- Overlap: $O_{xy} =df (\exists z)(P_{zx} \ \& \ P_{zy})$
- Partial Identity: $PI_{xy} =df O_{xy} \ \& \ \neg EQ_{xy}$

I believe that my definition of partial identity adequately captures Armstrong's intuitions that partial identity can take the form of two things having a common part (as in the case of the two adjoining terrace houses), or the form of two things standing in the whole-part relation (as in the case of Australia and New South Wales).

The definition also seems to be useful when applied to the so-called problem of *material constitution*. What is the relation between Lump and David, i.e. the lump of clay and the statue of David made of it? Well, the lump of clay “constitutes” the statue. But what is constitution? CT’s answer (inspired by Rea, 1998) is that it is partial identity. Lump and David are partially (yet not totally) identical, and also partially (yet not totally) distinct.

According to my definition, Lump is partially identical with David just in case Lump and David overlap (i.e. there is an object *z*, such that *z* = the matter of Lump, and *z* is a part of Lump, and *z* is a part of David), but they are not equal (i.e. it is not the case that both Lump is a part of David and David is a part of Lump).⁹

While the suggested answer is *prima facie* attractive, it still leaves the *main* question *unanswered*: How many objects are there actually located and to be counted on David’s pedestal?¹⁰ Are there two? Well, in some sense *yes*; after all, “we can distinguish David from Lump in virtue of the form present in David that is absent from Lump” (CT, 2017, p. 5). Or is there only one object? Well, in some sense *yes* again; after all, Lump and David share “all the same matter” (CT, 2017, p. 5) causing “their” co-location, and our commonsensical way of counting tells us that there is really only one object on the pedestal.

So, it is not obvious to me what exactly CT’s appeal to partial identity contributes to the solution of the problem of material constitution. In some sense we count one object, in another sense we count two objects. But wasn’t this precisely the problem, namely to explain why we are inclined to identify one object, but at the same time also two objects on the pedestal?¹¹

It should also be clear that the “solution” suggested by CT only works if we adopt the doctrine of *hylomorphism*, i.e. the view that every *physical* object is a compound of matter and form, each of which can adequately be regarded as a physical object’s part. What remains unclear to me is the ontological status of the *form* of Lump as well as that of David. Surely, Lump and David are both physical objects; their forms can thus barely be regarded as *immaterial* parts (unless one already equates forms with Platonic Forms that exist independently of material objects). In an Aristotelian spirit, I thus suggest to regard their forms as “matter-involving”.¹² Now, whatever one takes the exact analysis of this notion to be, a minimal requirement, to my mind, is that some matter (whether it exists in reality or just in thought) be mentioned in the specification of a form.¹³ Perhaps, as CT claims, there are “immaterial parts, that we can call forms” (2017, p. 5). But it is not obvious that the Lump-David case sustains this claim; I also do not see any other argument in CT’s essay that supports this view.¹⁴

4. Intentionality as Partial Identity Supports Dualism?

Trying to capture CT’s thesis that intentionality is partial identity, I would like to propose the following principle based on the above definitions:

- x is intentionally directed towards (or about) $y \leftrightarrow$
(PI xy & \neg PP xy & \neg PP yx)

For instance, my thought is directed towards a particular tree just in case my thought and the tree overlap (i.e. there is a *z*, such that *z* = the form of the tree, and *z* is a part of my thought, and *z* is a part of the tree), but my thought and the tree are not equal, and neither is my thought a proper part of the tree, nor is the tree a proper part of my thought.

Having clarified the notion of partial identity (that I believe to be relevant for the present discussion), I would next like to address CT's claim that intentionality conceived as partial identity "excludes a materialist account of the mind" (2017, p. 9).¹⁵ In this context the author attempts to give an explanation (or perhaps an abductive argument) for the following two claims in favor of mind/body-dualism:

1. The mind must be immaterial; and
2. It is in principle impossible for a material thing to be about another thing.¹⁶

I do not think that the argument is particularly clear. Its heart is encapsulated in the following quote:

If the mind were a material thing, then we would be confronted by a case of *total (qualitative, not numerical) identity*, since both the matter of the mind and the matter of the object of its thought would have the same form. To take a concrete example, if one's mind is material and it has the form of a tree as a part, then it just *is* [qualitatively] a tree, though not [numerically] the same tree. But clearly this is absurd. So the mind must be immaterial. (CT, 2017, p. 7f.; my italics, my insertion in brackets)

Here is my reconstruction of CT's argument. Suppose, for reductio, that the mind is *material* and is, as such, intentionally directed towards a particular material object (say, a particular tree). Then the material mind has the form of the tree as a part, and the material tree has the form of the tree as a part. Now, surely the material mind is numerically distinct from the material tree; yet, since it has the same form (quality) as the tree, it is also qualitatively identical with the tree. But it is absurd to conclude that the material mind and the material tree are *numerically distinct*, yet *qualitatively identical*. So - by reductio - either the mind is immaterial or, if it is material, it is not intentionally directed towards another material object (or both).

My worry is that the same kind of reductio argument also applies if we suppose that the mind is *immaterial* and is, as such, intentionally directed towards a particular material object (say, the tree). Also then the (now) immaterial mind has the form of the tree as (now) immaterial part, and the material tree has the form of the tree as (now) immaterial part. The immaterial mind is (now) also numerically distinct from the material tree; yet, since it has the same immaterial form (quality) as the tree, it is also qualitatively identical with the tree. But it is absurd to conclude that the immaterial mind and the material tree are numerically distinct, yet qualitatively identical. And so - by reductio - either the mind is material or, if it is immaterial, it is not intentionally directed towards another material object (or both).

The main worry is that CT's argument undermines the core idea of intentionality as partial identity, *regardless* of whether we think of the mind as material or immaterial. If we want to preserve the core idea, the supposition that there are matter-involving forms of material objects that can become part of the material mind and of the material object the material mind is about, fares no worse than the supposition that there are immaterial forms of material objects, that can become part of the immaterial mind and of the material object the immaterial mind is about. If the immaterial mind can *take in* the form of a tree without thereby becoming totally identical with the tree, why shouldn't this also be possible for the material mind?

5. Intentional Directness Towards Non-Existing Objects

Lastly, I would like to return to the question of how the mind can be intentionally directed towards non-existing objects, given the supposition that intentionality is partial identity. How can the mind be partially identical with something that it is about but does not exist? CT's proposal here is to say that:

... at least for *material particulars* [such as Tyrannosaurus Rex], existence comes only with matter. Since the form of a thing is all that is present in the mind, and since this can exist in the mind without the thing itself existing in matter, it follows that thought about non-existent particulars is no difficulty. (2017, p. 9; my italics, my insertion in brackets)

This answer does *not* explain, however, how we can, for instance, be intentionally directed towards fictional or even impossible objects (if there are such things). Recalling the definition of intentional directedness, suppose that S's thought is intentionally directed towards Sherlock Holmes (or, for that matter, towards the round square). Then, by applying the definition we obtain (something like) the following:

There is an x, there is a y, and there is a z, such that x = S's thought, and y = Sherlock Holmes (or the round square), and y does not (or even cannot) exist, and z = the form of y, and z is a part of x, and z is a part of y, and x and y are not equal, and x is not a proper part of y, and y is not a proper part of x.

But what exactly is the *form* of Sherlock Holmes that my mind *takes in* when I think about him? An *immaterial part*, i.e. the form of a non-existing object? Even worse, what is the *form* of the round square that my mind has just *taken in* when I wrote this sentence? Obviously it cannot be the shape of the round square; but what exactly is it then?¹⁷

The analysis above - capturing Alexius Meinong's intuition that intentionality *is* a genuine relation between mental phenomena and the objects they are about - entails that there are objects that do not (or even cannot) exist. But is this really so?

6. Conclusion

I suggest not to simply dismiss the insight of the later Brentano who *denies* that mental phenomena stand in genuine relations to ontologically full-blown *objects of thought*. If Brentano is right, intentionality is *no genuine relation*. On the other hand, CT's proposal to view intentionality as partial identity entails that it is. While the employment of the notion of partial identity may be capable of covering a lot of ground, I am still skeptical that it can also appropriately cover the tricky terrain of intentionality.

Notes

¹ I do not want to take issue here with Brentano's claim that all and only mental phenomena are intentionally directed towards something, i.e. that intentionality is the mark of the mental. On the face of it, there are

mental phenomena that are not intentionally directed towards anything particular (e.g. anxiety, depression, dizziness, etc.); conversely, there may be physical phenomena that are "intentionally" directed towards something (e.g. a compass's needle steadily pointing north).

² As Thomas Ainsworth remarks:

Aristotle famously contends that every physical object is a compound of matter and form. This doctrine has been called "hylomorphism", a portmanteau of the Greek words for matter (*hylê*) and form (*eidos* or *morphê*). (2016)

³ Oskar Kraus makes the same point over and over again, for instance, in his introduction to Brentano's *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt*, where he says:

If I, for instance, represent the God Jupiter, then only the representer of the God Jupiter exists, but the God Jupiter exists (is or subsists) *in no way*. (1874a, p. XXVI; my translation, my italics)

In this context one should also notice Roderick M. Chisholm's entry on Brentano in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:

If someone thinks of something, then, although there must be a thinker, the thing he thinks about need not exist. (1972, p. 365)

Finally, notice Brentano's own words:

So the thinking is thus the only thing which is required by the psychical relation. The term of the so-called relation does not even have to be given in reality. One could therefore doubt whether there really is something relative here at hand and not rather something which to a certain consideration is similar to a relative, to which one could thus refer as something "quasi-relational". (1874b, p. 134; my translation)

⁴ I shall return to the problem of non-existing objects below when I discuss CT's suggestion to understand intentional directedness towards these objects as partial identity.

⁵ Both Donald Baxter and David Armstrong have attempted to analyze instantiation (or exemplification) in terms of partial identity of a particular and a universal. As Nicholas Mantegani (see 2013, p. 699, n.3) points out though, Armstrong has since given up this view. And Baxter emphasizes that his own account is quite different from Armstrong's in that it allows to capture the contingency of instantiation. Here is what Baxter claims in regard to instantiation understood as partial identity:

Instantiation is the cross-count identity of an aspect in the particulars count with itself in the universals count. Following the use of Bradley ... I call the resulting identity of particular and universal, partial identity. (2013, p. 293)

It will first be noticed that even the champions of partial identity disagree about how exactly this notion should be explicated. Second, it will be noticed that there is no obvious connection between instantiation as partial identity of aspects of particulars and universals (as suggested in different ways by both Baxter and Armstrong), and intentionality as partial identity (as suggested by CT).

⁶ See Achille Varzi (2016). I follow his lead here and take the parthood relation "P" and numerical identity "=" to be primitive. Just as Varzi, I also simplify notation by dropping all initial universal quantifiers; unless otherwise specified, all formulae are to be understood as universally closed.

⁷ I think that the difference between equality (or mereological identity), numerical, and qualitative identity can schematically be characterized as follows:

- Equality: $EQ_{xy} =_{df} P_{xy} \ \& \ P_{yx}$

- Numerical Identity: $x=y \leftrightarrow (\forall F)(Fx \leftrightarrow Fy)$
- Qualitative Identity: $x \approx y \leftrightarrow (\exists F)(Fx \leftrightarrow Fy)$

Varzi (2016) points out that the parthood relation has the formal properties of reflexivity, transitivity, and antisymmetry (i.e. "Two distinct things cannot be part of each other.") Antisymmetry, in logical notation, thus says:

- $x \neq y \rightarrow \neg(Pxy \ \& \ Pyx)$

which is logically equivalent to its contrapositive:

- $(Pxy \ \& \ Pyx) \rightarrow x=y$

Since the antecedent of the resulting conditional is logically equivalent to the definiens of equality, we obtain:

- $EQxy \rightarrow x=y$

My hunch is that, per Varzi, the converse of this conditional does not hold because x and y may be "mereological simple objects" that do not have any parts. Notice that the principle is silent about numerical identity in case of non-equality.

Moreover, it should be noticed that things "with qualitative identity share properties, so things can be more or less qualitatively identical. Poodles and Great Danes are qualitatively identical because they share the property of being a dog ... Numerical identity requires absolute, or total, qualitative identity and can only hold between a thing and itself." (Noonan & Curtis, 2014)

This observation leads to Leibniz's Law, i.e. the conjunction of the Principle of Indiscernibility of Identicals, and of the Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles:

- $(x=y \rightarrow (\forall F)(Fx \leftrightarrow Fy)) \ \& \ ((\forall F)(Fx \leftrightarrow Fy) \rightarrow x=y)$

which is logically equivalent to:

- $x=y \leftrightarrow (\forall F)(Fx \leftrightarrow Fy)$

⁸ Alternatively, one could take *proper parthood* as primitive and then define *parthood* as:

- $Pxy =df \ PPxy \vee x=y$

⁹ A little reflection reveals that the second conjunct expressing non-equality is logically equivalent to:

- Lump is not a part of David \vee David is not a part of Lump.

Focusing on the first disjunct, it will be noticed that it is true (given the doctrine of hylomorphism). For only a part of Lump - but not Lump - is a part of David (namely, Lump's matter, but not its form). Mutatis mutandis, the same is true for the second disjunct. So, by logic, the second conjunct expressing non-equality is true. In other words, non-equality obtains here because there is a part of Lump - namely, *its form* - that David lacks, and conversely, there is a part of David - namely, *its form* - that Lump lacks.

¹⁰ As noted above, the principle of Antisymmetry is silent about numerical identity in case of non-equality.

¹¹ In this context Michael Rea (1998) remarks with respect to the notion of *accidental sameness* (allegedly holding, for instance, between Socrates and seated-Socrates) that it is a relation weaker than numerical identity but stronger than co-location. Perhaps, this idea can be further employed to explicate the relation of partial identity that supposedly holds between Lump and David and to explain, in more detail, the different intuitions we have when it comes to counting the objects on David's pedestal. Lump and David are not totally identical, as they have distinct forms; so we are inclined to count them as two things. Yet, they are also not totally distinct, as they share the same matter; so we are inclined to count "them" as one thing. As

Rea notes, a relation such as *accidental sameness* (or partial identity for that matter):

... occurs whenever some matter is organized in several different ways at once, and whenever it occurs we can identify different kinds of objects in the same place but nevertheless count "them" as one thing. (1998, p. 322)

¹² If we focus on David and assume that Lump is a *material* proper part of David (an assumption which is actually left open by my proposed definition of partial identity), it may be argued that David must have a *formal* proper part. This conclusion may be justified by appeal to the (problematic) principle of Weak Supplementation:

- $PPxy \rightarrow (\exists z) (Pzy \ \& \ \neg Ozx)$

which says in plain English:

... a whole cannot be decomposed into a single proper part. According to this principle, every proper part must be "supplemented" by another, *disjoint* part, and it is this last qualification that captures the notion of a remainder. ... Yet here there is room for genuine disagreement. (Varzi, 2016)

While there is no space for further discussion of this principle here (which was mentioned only in personal conversation at the SWPS meeting), it should be clear that, without further ado, the supposition that David has a *formal proper part* does *not* entail that it has an *immaterial* proper part. If formal proper parts exist, they might still be "matter-involving".

¹³ Ainsworth (2016) points out that there are at least two senses of the term *form* for Aristotle. When focusing on artifacts, Aristotle seems to simply mean their *shape*; but when focusing on organisms, he rather seems to mean their *definition*, essence, or final cause (if you prefer). Still, I do not think that this turns a *formal* part of a physical object (if there is any) into its *immaterial* part.

¹⁴ And wouldn't it be highly problematic to think of the forms of physical objects as their *immaterial* parts? Wouldn't then every physical object already have an immaterial part? Wouldn't that already presuppose some version of Platonism - at least some ontological view that is not self-evidently true?

¹⁵ Cf. also CT's endorsement (2017, p. 1f.) of John Searle's view. Regarding the *irreducibility* of the mental (in particular of intentionality) to the physical, I would only like to briefly mention that there are various forms of *materialist token identity theories* that do sustain the claim of *irreducibility*. For instance, Donald Davidson's *Anomalous Monism* suggests "that the mental is nomologically irreducible" (1970, p. 120). For Davidson there are no strict deterministic psycho-physical laws, i.e. laws on the basis of which types of mental events can be predicted and explained on the basis of types of physical events. In other words: *Types* of mental events do not reduce to *types* of physical events; yet all *tokens* of mental events are identical with *tokens* of physical events.

¹⁶ Setting aside the modalities occurring in both claims to avoid further unnecessary complication, the claims reduce to:

- 1) The mind is immaterial; and
- 2) A material thing is not about another material thing.

¹⁷ The problems related to the *form* of non-existent objects extend to other so-called *objects of thought*, e.g. to propositions about which we make judgments. When I believe that Flaubert was a better novelist than Balzac, what is the *form* of the proposition that my mind *takes in*? And just as presentations and propositional judgments, phenomena of love and hate fare no better - as I can love or hate Sherlock Holmes, the round square, the

proposition that Flaubert was a better novelist than Balzac, or what not. In all these cases, what exactly is the *form* of the *object* that becomes a *part* of my thought?

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