## Sensory Experience and Intentionalism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journal:</th>
<th>Philosophy Compass</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manuscript ID:</td>
<td>PHCO-0086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuscript Type:</td>
<td>Article</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keywords:</td>
<td>Epistemology &lt; - Compass sections, Epistemology &lt; - Subject, intentionality &lt; - Key Topics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sensory Experience and Intentionalism

Abstract

Increasingly prominent in the recent literature on the philosophy of perception, Intentionalism holds that sensory experience is inherently intentional, where to be intentional is to be about, or directed on, something. This article explores Intentionalism’s prospects as a viable ontological and epistemological alternative to the traditional trinity of theories of sensory experience: the Sense-Datum Theory, The Adverbial Theory, and The Theory of Appearing.

1. Introduction

What is the nature of sensory experience? Our question looms large in epistemology, and for good reason. For unless all knowledge is a priori—as claimed by an implausible extreme rationalism—sensory experience is the (or at least a prime) source of our knowledge of the world.¹ Our question looms large in metaphysics as well, as the history of philosophy bears ample witness to how key arguments for and against Realism, Idealism, and Phenomenalism have rested on crucial premises concerned with the nature of sensory experience.² It’s no exaggeration to claim that our cognitive contact with the world crucially turns on the nature of sensory experience, and so to understand the former we have to understand the latter. So what then is its nature, and what implications does its nature have for our knowledge of the world?

Once upon a time, some forty years ago or so, there were three main philosophical theories of the nature of sensory experience: the Sense-Datum Theory, the Adverbial Theory,
and the Theory of Appearing. Over the past four decades, however, a fourth theory (or family of theories) has arisen, and now enjoys considerable prominence. Its central thesis is that sensory experience is inherently intentional, where to be intentional is to be about, or directed on, something. Known naturally enough as Intentionalism, it purports to offer a viable alternative to the traditional trinity.³

But does it deliver what it purports to offer? In light of Intentionalism’s increasing popularity, my aim here is to explore its prospects as an alternative. My plan is as follows. To provide some background for our discussion, in section 2, I briefly delineate the three traditional views and point out their main virtues and the main objections lodged against them. In section 3, I explain Intentionalism and explore its viability as an alternative. In section 4, I conclude with some conspective remarks.

2. The Traditional Trinity

So that we may better understand Intentionalism and its prospects as an alternative, let’s consider the gist of the Sense-Datum Theory, the Adverbial Theory, and the Theory of Appearing. Since the respective virtues and problems of each of them are well-documented in the literature, I will only discuss them briefly here.

Each member of the trinity can be understood as a reaction to Naïve Realism, a species of the broader genus: Direct Realism. The genus holds that physical objects and events phenomenally appear to us in sensory experience without a logically prior awareness of anything else. Naïve Realism holds in addition that physical objects and events phenomenally appear to us exactly as they are. It’s this latter differentia that has earned this species of Direct Realism the pejorative moniker “Naïve”, for a number of problems afflict it. The existence of hallucinations
and illusions pose obvious problems for Naïve Realism, but there are others as well. These include time-lags in perception, the seeming non-objectivity of secondary qualities, and causal considerations.

The Sense-Datum Theory, whose theoretical ancestors include the Cartesian and Lockean theory of ideas and medieval accounts of sensory species, arose in reaction to the problems that afflict Naïve Realism. Championed in the works (among others) of Russell (1912), Moore (1922), Price (1932), Broad (1923, 1925), Jackson (1977), and Robinson (1994), it takes sensory experience to consist in a subject’s awareness of sense-data. Typically conceived of as non-physical objects of awareness, sense-data are supposed to actually have the phenomenal features that physical objects appear to have. On this theory, only sense-data are immediate or direct objects of sensory experience and the latter is genuinely relational: the subject and the sense-data are actual existent relata. The Sense-Datum Theory’s primary virtue has always been its ability to handle the problems afflicting Naïve Realism, by offering an account in terms of sense-data of hallucination and illusion, time-lags in perception, the seeming non-objectivity of secondary qualities, and the causal considerations involved in sensory experience.

Despite its popularity in the first half of the last century, however, it has now been largely abandoned in the face of a host of objections. From the metaphysical point of view, it’s been indicted on charges of ontological profligacy (e.g., conjuring up a whole order of non-physical existents), and of positing entities (sense-data) with unclear identity conditions (e.g., how long do sense-data last? do they exist in physical space? are they two or three-dimensional? etc.). From the epistemological point of view, however, its most serious indictment is that it recapitulates what Johnston has called the “Cartesian Problematic” by modeling sensory experience as essentially complete whether or not it has an object in extra-mental reality.
this view, even *veridical* sensory experience is not inherently a relation to extra-mental reality, and sensory experience of “external” objects amounts to just experience plus appropriate causation, where “experience is just a mental event at the end of a causal chain, a mere effect of the external cause.”\(^9\) Conceived of in this way, experience, even when veridical, is essentially intra-mental and never an experiential *acquaintance* with external reality, a reality to which we have no real direct cognitive contact.

The Adverbial Theory arose in reaction to the metaphysical problems with the Sense-Datum Theory. Championed in the works (among others) of Ducasse (1942), Chisholm (1957, 1976), Sellars (1963, 1968), Cornman (1971), Clark (1970, 1987), and Tye (1984, 1989), its basic idea is that sensory experience is inherently non-relational and consists in an intrinsically objectless sensing or being appeared to. For instance, what a Sense-Datum theorist would describe as a sensory experience of something red and round, the Adverbialist would redescribe as a sensing (or being appeared to) redly and roundly. Sensory experience on this view is an event in, or state of, the subject, and does not consist in a genuine relation to any object of awareness whether non-physical or physical.\(^{10}\)

The virtues of the Adverbial Theory include its avoidance of the problems associated with Naïve Realism, together with its avoidance of metaphysical problems that arise with positing sense-data. To those sympathetic to Reductive Materialism, it has the further virtue that sensory experience—if nothing but an event in, or state of, the subject—proves amenable to materialist reduction if the subject is taken to be wholly physical.

Despite these virtues, a host of objections also confronts the Adverbial Theory. Typical charges against it include its phenomenological inaptitude, for sensory experience seems to involve a presentation of objects, and the Adverbial Theory fails to capture this; its rejection of
what seem to be obvious truths, namely, that ‘to sense’ and ‘to appear’ are fundamentally relational, for to sense is to sense something and to be appeared to is to be appeared to by something; and the awkwardness and dubious intelligibility of its adverbial constructions (e.g., sensing roundly and greenly to the left of squarely and bluely, and the like). From the epistemological viewpoint, however, its most serious indictment is that it too, in its own way, recapitulates the Cartesian Problematic. That is, in taking sensory experience to be essentially objectless, the Adverbial Theory construes it as essentially complete whether or not it has an object in extra-mental reality. Accordingly, no sensory experience, even if veridical, is inherently a relation to extra-mental reality, and so here too it is “just a mental event at the end of a causal chain, a mere effect of the external cause.” Thus, despite their other differences, the Sense-Datum Theory and the Adverbial Theory both entail that sensory experience is essentially intra-mental and never an experiential acquaintance or real cognitive contact with external reality if either theory is true.

The Theory of Appearing, the third member of the traditional trinity, predated the Adverbial Theory, and arose in the first half of the twentieth century in reaction to Idealism and Phenomenalism. Its early champions include Prichard (1909), Coffey (1917), Hicks (1938), and Barnes (1945). Later defenders include Alston (2005, 2002, 1999, 1998, 1990), Langsam (1997), and Le Morvan (2004, 2000). Views akin to it, reinvented later and apparently independently of it, include positions known as “Disjunctivism” and the “Relational View.”11 Though not a form of Naïve Realism insofar as the latter takes sensory experience to always be an awareness of external physical objects or events exactly as they are, the Theory of Appearing is still a species of the genus Direct Realism and takes sensory experience (at least in veridical and illusory cases) to be an awareness of external physical objects and events.12 This awareness, as conceived on
this theory, inherently involves a genuine (and irreducible) relation to some external object or event in veridical cases (where something external appears as it is to the subject) and in illusory cases (where something external appears other than it is to the subject). Thus, in veridical and illusory cases, external objects or events are constitutive of sensory experience so conceived. Hallucinatory cases, on this theory, require separate treatment.\textsuperscript{13}

The virtues of the Theory of Appearing include accommodating (unlike the Adverbial Theory) the seeming obviousness of the relational structure of sensory experience without conjuring up (unlike the Sense-Datum Theory) a whole order of non-physical existents, avoiding the Cartesian Problematic by preserving sensory experience’s linkage to the external world, and being far more amenable than its rivals to pretheoretical realist intuitions about sensory experience.

Like its rivals, the Theory of Appearing has been indicted on numerous charges, most of which recall those directed against Naïve Realism. According to these charges, the theory fails to adequately handle the existence of hallucinations, time-lags in perception, the seeming non-objectivity of secondary qualities, and causal considerations. Those averse to irreducible relations also find the theory objectionable, as do those whose internalist sympathies lead them to reject the idea that sensory experience could be constituted in part by external objects or events.

Having delineated the traditional theories of sensory experience, and noted some of the main objections lodged against them, let’s now consider Intentionalism and explore its prospects as an alternative. If Intentionalism could parry the objections to its putative rivals, it would prove well-motivated indeed.
3. Intentionalism as an Alternative

Intentionalism’s central thesis is that sensory experience is essentially intentional, where to be intentional is to be about, or directed on, something. A key question now emerges: is this intentionality a genuine relation? A genuine relation is one that holds between, and requires the existence of, at least two actual relata. Intentionalism can thus be divided into two main forms: one that takes intentionality to be a genuine relation, and another that does not. We’ll call the former “Relational Intentionalism,” and the latter “Non-Relational Intentionalism,” and consider the prospects of each.

In this connection, two clarifications are in order:

First, the distinction drawn here between Relational and Non-Relational Intentionalism concerns whether the intentionality of sensory experience is a genuine relation between the subject and what sensory experience is about. As we shall later see, however, Non-Relational Intentionalism can still be relational in another sense, namely, as a relation to a content.

Second, according to what we may call the “Opacity Thesis,” x’s being about or directed on y does not entail that y exists. In the ensuing discussion, I won’t saddle Intentionalism per se with a commitment to this thesis, however widely held it may be. I will leave it rather as an open question, for the Opacity Thesis is certainly not self-evident and requires argument. Those who accept it will have reason (beyond what I shall argue here) to think that the only coherent form of Intentionalism is Non-Relational Intentionalism. I won’t, however, take such a quick route with dismissing Relational Intentionalism as a viable alternative to the traditional trinity.

With these clarifications now made, let’s now consider Relational Intentionalism.
3.1. Relational Intentionalism

Relational Intentionalism takes sensory experience to be essentially intentional where this intentionality is understood as a genuine relation to what the sensory experience is about. Let’s call what a sensory experience is about its “intendum.” Since a genuine relation holds between, and thus requires, at least two existent relata, and since the subject having the sensory experience is one existent relatum, the intendum is the other. A question now arises: what is the nature of intenda? In addressing this question in what follows, I will consider the basic ontological options, namely whether intenda are concrete particulars, universals, or tropes (abstract particulars). I will not directly address the question whether intenda can also be complexes (such as events, states, or states of affairs) of concrete particulars and universals or tropes, but the implications for such complexes should be fairly obvious from what I say about the basic ontological categories.

3.1.1. Intenda as Concrete Particulars

Suppose intenda are concrete particulars. If so, they are either non-physical or physical.

Suppose intenda are non-physical objects. If so, then what kind of non-physical objects are they? What properties do they have? The only properties they could have in this case are presumably phenomenal properties, the properties that physical objects appear to have. But to posit such non-physical objects of sensory experience amounts to nothing less than positing sense-data, for the latter are supposed to be non-physical objects with phenomenal properties. Intenda so conceived, Relational Intentionalism fails to offer a genuine alternative to the Sense-Datum Theory, collapsing into a version of it.
Suppose then that intenda are physical. If so, then they are either external (extra-bodily) or internal (intra-bodily).

If they are external physical objects, then Relational Intentionalism collapses into a version of the Theory of Appearing’s Direct Realism. Why? Because, like the latter, it takes external physical objects to be relata constitutive of sensory experience. Notice also that, like the Theory of Appearing, it faces the problem of what to take intenda to be in the case of hallucinatory experience where no external physical object corresponds to what is hallucinated. Accordingly, if Relational Intentionalism takes intenda to be external physical objects, it fails to offer a genuine alternative to the Theory of Appearing, for it collapses into a version of the latter.

If Relational Intentionalism takes intenda to be internal (intra-bodily) physical objects, then it does offer an alternative to the Theory of Appearing. In this case, however, it implausibly collapses the distinction between sensory experience (understood as extrospective) and bodily sensations like proprioception or kinesthesia or pain. For seeing, hearing, and the like would not ever be about objects out there in the extra-bodily world, but only about parts of the subject’s body. Insofar as sensory experience seems for the most part to reveal to us a world beyond our bodies, all sensory experience would turn out to be radically illusory, and so we are no longer dealing here with the category of veridical sensory experience.

The upshot of this reasoning is that, if intenda are taken to be concrete particulars, then depending on whether they are construed as physical or non-physical, Relational Intentionalism collapses into either a version of the Theory of Appearing or of the Sense-Datum Theory, or implausibly collapses the distinction between sensory experience and bodily sensation. Ergo, it fails to offer a genuine or viable alternative to the Theory of Appearing or the Sense-Datum Theory.
3.1.2. Intenda as Universals

Suppose now that intenda are universals. If so, they’re either instantiated or not.

If they are instantiated, then they’re instantiated by something physical or non-physical. In either case, subjects are presumably intentionally related in sensory experience to what instantiates the intenda, i.e., to what has the intenda as a property or relation. If this is an external physical object, we’re back on our way to a version of the Theory of Appearing, namely one married to an ontology that takes physical objects to instantiate universals. Moreover, we also have the problem of what to do with non-veridical cases where nothing in the external physical world instantiates intenda. If we suppose that what instantiates intenda is something non-physical, we’re back on our way to a version of the Sense-Datum Theory, namely one married to an ontology that takes non-physical sense-data to instantiate universals. Either way, Relational Intentionalism fails to provide a genuine alternative to the Theory of Appearing or the Sense-Datum Theory.

If intenda are not instantiated, then they’re presumably transcendent (Platonic) universals, and as such exist beyond space and time. Construing intenda this way, the Relational Intentionalist at last offers an alternative to the Theory of Appearing and the Sense-Datum Theory. But is it a viable alternative?

We have good reason to think not. For consider what this alternative commits us to: transcendent universals being constitutive relata of sensory experience. But how could sensory experience be an awareness of anything beyond the spatio-temporal? And how could anything not spatio-temporal be constitutive of sensory experience? Think about it. Notice that accepting this view—together with the widely held tenet that only the concrete has causal efficacy—requires giving up any commitment to the causal closure of the spatio-temporal world and to
boot the causal principle that what we are aware of in sensory experience must have a causal role in bringing about the experience. Notice also that, since sensory experience typically seems phenomenologically to be an awareness of objects extended in space that have various features, phenomenology would turn out to be radically erroneous. That it’s erroneous in cases of illusion and hallucination is one thing, but that it’s systematically erroneous is much harder to swallow. Moreover, if in sensory experience we’re never aware of these objects, but only of uninstantiated transcendent universals, we’re left without any plausible account of what *veridical* sensory experience consists in, and in fact without any plausible account of our cognitive contact with the spatio-temporal world.

In light of these considerations, I conclude that, although taking intenda to be uninstantiated universals provides the Relational Intentionalist with a alternative to the Sense-Datum Theory and the Theory of Appearing, it does so at the considerable cost of a highly dubious ontology and epistemology, a cost that undercuts Relational Intentionalism’s viability as an alternative to the traditional trinity.

Similar considerations apply as well to Relational Intentionalist/Theory of Appearing or Relational Intentionalist/Sense-Datum Theory hybrids according to which all cases of sensory experience essentially involve awareness of universals: instantiated ones in veridical cases and uninstantiated ones in non-veridical cases. While these hybrids differ from non-hybrid versions of the Theory of Appearing and the Sense-Datum Theory with respect to how the latter have standardly treated non-veridical sensory experience, these hybrids fail to offer genuine alternatives to the non-hybrids as far as veridical sensory experience is concerned, and commit us to a dubious ontology as far as non-veridical sensory experience is concerned.
3.1.3. Intenda as Tropes

Suppose now that intenda are tropes (or abstract particulars, or property-instances). If so, intenda are either bundled to an object with other compresent tropes or they aren’t.

If intenda are bundled, then we are presumably intentionally related in sensory experience to that with which intenda are bundled.19 If this is an external physical object, we revert to a version of the Theory of Appearing, namely one now married to an ontology that takes physical objects or events to be bundles of compresent tropes. If this is something non-physical, we revert to a version of the Sense-Datum Theory, namely one now married to an ontology that takes non-physical sense-data to be bundles of compresent tropes.

If intenda are not bundled, then they’re “free floating.” Construing them this way, the Relational Intentionalist once more has an alternative to the Theory of Appearing and the Sense-Datum Theory. But is it a viable alternative?

Again, we have good reason to think not. For vexing questions arise concerning the nature of these unbundled tropes. If they are not bundled with external physical objects, then where are they? How long do they last? What in general are their identity conditions? Notice also how these questions start to sound like the very questions that bedevil the Sense-Datum Theory. Taking intenda to be free-floating tropes also requires holding that phenomenology is radically erroneous insofar as it typically seems in sensory experience that we’re aware, not of free-floating tropes, but of objects having various features. We’re also left without any plausible account of what veridical sensory experience consists in.

In light of these considerations, I conclude that, while taking intenda to be unbundled tropes also provides the Relational Intentionalist with a alternative to the Sense-Datum and the Theory of Appearing, doing so comes once again at the considerable cost of a highly dubious
ontology and epistemology, one that undercuts Relational Intentionalism’s status as a viable alternative to the traditional trinity. And as was the case with universals, considerations similar to those above apply as well to Relational Intentionalist/Theory of Appearing or Relational Intentionalist/Sense-Datum Theory hybrids.  

3.1.4. Taking Stock of Relational Intentionalism

Relational Intentionalism takes the intentionality of sensory experience to be a genuine relation to its intendment. We’ve considered the basic ontological options for what intenda could be: concrete particulars, universals, and tropes. In each case, we have found that Relational Intentionalism fails to deliver a genuine alternative to either the Sense-Datum Theory or the Theory of Appearing, or does so at the cost of a dubious ontology and an implausible account of our cognitive contact with the world. Where Relational Intentionalism fails, can non-Relational Intentionalism do better?

3.2. Non-Relational Intentionalism

Non-Relational Intentionalism can be characterized in terms of two central tenets that we’ll call for ease of reference “the Negative Tenet” and “the Positive Tenet.”

The Negative Tenet denies that the intentionality of sensory experience consists in a genuine relation between the subject having the sensory experience and its intendment. This intentionality is thereby treated as “an illusion of a relation” as Crane puts it. (2001, 120) Although it’s consistent with taking intenda to be mind-independent physical objects, on this tenet the latter are never constitutive of (or essential to) sensory experience, for intenda are never genuine relata thereof. Note that the Negative Tenet does not entail an Indirect Realism—
according to which sensory experience of mind-independent physical objects is indirect in involving a logically prior awareness of some tertium quid (a sense-datum, idea, quality-instance, or what have you)—for in taking sensory experience to be essentially non-relational, it denies that sensory experience is a genuinely relational acquaintance with anything, whether directly or indirectly.

The Positive Tenet affirms that intentional content is essential to sensory experience, and this content is the way it represents its intendment (or intenda). On this tenet then, whether you’re seeing a fountain or visually hallucinating one, in both cases your sensory experience has the same intentional content of representing a fountain in a certain way—an intendment that need not exist for the sensory experience to occur. In fact, on this tenet, hallucinatory and veridical episodes of sensory experience can have exactly the same content.

Apart from these central tenets, versions of Non-Relational Intentionalism differentiate themselves according to how they answer the following key questions: Are intenda to be conceived of substantially or schematically? Is the content of sensory experience essentially propositional? Is the content of sensory experience essentially conceptual? Is the content of sensory experience broad or narrow? In what follows, I will give an overview of these debates, and then later consider the question whether Non-Relational Intentionalism provides us with a genuine alternative to the three traditional theories of sensory experience.

3.2.1. Are intenda to be conceived of substantially or schematically?

It’s seems natural to take the intenda of episodes of sensory experience to be ordinary physical objects (see for instance Searle 1983). For instance, if I see a tricolor beagle, it’s the tricolor beagle out there in the world that is the intendment of my episode of seeing. While this answer
seems natural enough in cases of veridical sensory experience, it fails in cases of hallucination (e.g., Macbeth’s dagger) where the intenda cannot be ordinary physical objects. Accordingly, taking ordinary physical objects to be intenda raises a serious problem for Non-Relational Intentionalism, for on this view hallucination and veridical sensory experience can have exactly the same content.

To avoid this problem, adherents of Non-Relational Intentionalism can opt for a schematic rather than a substantial conception of intenda (see Crane 2001, Valberg 1992, Smith 2002, Butchvarov 1998). Whereas a substantial conception of intenda takes them to be existents with a nature, a schematic conception takes them to have no nature of their own, and to be simply that on which the mind is directed when one is in an intentional state like sensory experience (Crane 2001, 16-17). If some intenda do not exist (e.g., Macbeth’s dagger), then we must conclude that there is no common category of intenda on the very plausible ontological assumption that a category exists only if all its members exist.

3.2.2. Is the content of sensory experience essentially propositional?

The Propositionalist form of Non-Relational Intentionalism answers this question affirmatively. Runzo (1977), Searle (1983), Pendlebury (1987), and Byrne (2001) provide prominent defenses of this view. Its basic idea is that all sensory experience is an assertional propositional attitude (akin in this way to belief or judgment) with an intentional content that represents the world to be a certain way and that is evaluable as true or false. For example, you can have the sensory experience that a fountain is in front of you, and the putative content of this experience is propositionally structured. The proper formulation, then, of ascriptions of sensory experience is of the following form: subject \( S \) has the sensory experience that \( p \), where \( p \) is some proposition.
Such a view is an upshot of a widely held conception of intentionality according to which all intentionality is propositionally structured.\textsuperscript{22}

The Non-Propositionalist form of Non-Relational Intentionalism answers the question negatively. Its basic idea is that not all episodes of sensory experience are akin to propositional attitudes. For instance, you can have the sensory experience of seeing a ribbing plough without seeing that (or recognizing) it is a ribbing plough. Non-Propositionalists argue that objectual seeing is more cognitively basic than propositional seeing, for the latter entails recognition or categorization, while the former does not. See, for instance, Vision (1998, 1997) and Crane (2001).

### 3.2.3. Is the intentional content of sensory experience essentially conceptual?

Consider the belief that a beagle is barking. This belief (and belief in general) is uncontroversially an inherently conceptual form of representation. That is, its intentional content essentially involves the deployment of conceptual capacities: only if one has and deploys the concepts of predication, of beagle, and of barking could one have this belief. More generally, only if one has and deploys the concepts of predication, of \( o \), and of \( F \) can one have the belief that \( o \) is \( F \). Consider now the putative sensory experience that \( o \) is \( F \) (e.g., that a beagle is barking). The Conceptualist form of Non-Relational Intentionalism claims that all sensory experience has, like belief, an inherently conceptual intentional content such that one can have the sensory experience that \( o \) is \( F \) only if one has and deploys the concepts of \( o \), of \( F \), and of predication. See, for instance, Porter (2006) and Runzo (1982).\textsuperscript{23}

The Non-Conceptualist form of Non-Relational Intentionalism accepts that all sensory experience has intentional content, but take this content to be non-conceptual: sensory
experience represents the world as being a certain way (say, that a beagle is barking) even if the
subject having the experience does not have or deploy the concepts required for believing that a
beagle is barking. On this view, the intentional content of sensory experience is thus less
cognitively sophisticated than the intentional content of belief. Defenders of this kind of Non-
Conceptualism include Evans (1982), Peacocke (2001a, 2001b), Crane (2001), Bermudez

3.2.4. Is the intentional content of sensory experience broad or narrow?
Another important debate concerning the putative intentional content of sensory experience
concerns whether it is broad or narrow. Its content is broad if its existence entails the actual
existence of its intendment. For instance, one subscribes to a broad conception of such content if
one takes it to be singular: the content is about a particular object and cannot exist unless that
object exists. One also subscribes to a broad conception of such content if one accepts an
externalism on which such content is individuated by a real relation (e.g, causal or teleological)
to objects or properties in the environment. See Dretske (2000, 1996, 1994), Tye (2006, 2000,

By contrast, the content of sensory experience is narrow if its existence does not entail
that actual existence of its intendment. To take such content to be general (that is, not about any
particular object and existing independently of the existence of any particular object) is to
subscribe to a narrow conception of such content. Moreover, an internalist conception entails a
narrow conception of such content insofar as it denies that the content of sensory experience is
individuated by any real relation to objects or properties in the environment (See, for instance,
Crane 2001 and Segal 2000 for internalist views.)
3.2.5. Non-Relational Intentionalism as an Alternative

Having surveyed the main forms that Non-Relational Intentionalism can take, let’s now consider whether it (or any of its versions) constitutes a genuine alternative to the members of the traditional trinity.

It’s clear that in virtue of the Negative Tenet, Non-Relational Intentionalism constitutes a genuine alternative to the Sense-Datum Theory and the Theory of Appearing, for the latter two both affirm that the intentionality of sensory experience is genuinely relational: sensory experience consists in a genuine relation between the subject and the intendum, where the latter is an actual relatum whether non-physical or physical. But what about the remaining member of the traditional trinity: the Adverbial Theory?

Notice that in its fundamentally non-relational construal of sensory experience, Non-Relational Intentionalism is in a very deep sense similar to the Adverbial Theory which too takes sensory experience to be non-relational. Since it holds that existing or actual intenda are not essential to (nor constitutive of) sensory experience, Non-Relational Intentionalism is, again like the Adverbial Theory, committed to holding that sensory experience is essentially an event in or state of the subject, and does not inherently consist in any genuine relation to any actual object of acquaintance whether physical or non-physical.

To be sure, in virtue of the Positive Tenet, Non-Relational Intentionalism differs conceptually from the Adverbial Theory, for the former eschews the latter’s awkward adverbial descriptions of sensory experience in favor of descriptions invoking content and intenda. To that extent, it provides a superior alternative to the Adverbial Theory at least insofar as surface ontology is concerned. But does it offer one insofar as deep ontology and epistemology are concerned?
It does not. Here’s why. However one comes down on whether to accept a schematic or substantial conception of intenda, a propositionalist or non-propositionalist conception of sensory experience, a conceptualist or non-conceptualist conception of sensory experience, or a broad or narrow conception of intentional content, in order to coherently remain a Non-Relational Intentionalist one must still take sensory experience to be inherently non-relational and so devoid of an external world intendum as relatum. Non-Relational Intentionalism (or any of its versions) thus fails to offer a deep ontological alternative to the Adverbial Theory, for the latter in the most fundamental sense also takes sensory experience to be non-relational in this way. Whereas the Adverbial Theory straightforwardly denies the intentionality of sensory experience, Non-Relational Intentionalism, in whatever ways its versions may invoke content and intenda, treats such intentionality as an illusion of a relation. But in so doing, Non-Relational Intentionalism (in whatever its guises) really offers an illusion of an ontological alternative to the Adverbial Theory. Notice also that it fails to offer a deep epistemological alternative to the Adverbial Theory, for it too takes sensory experience, even when veridical, to be essentially intra-mental and never an experiential acquaintance with an intendum in external reality, thus recapitulating the Cartesian Problematic by modeling sensory experience as essentially complete whether or not its intendum actually exists in extra-mental reality.

Since these points have gone widely unacknowledged in the literature, let me reinforce them by showing their relevance to one of the debates we considered earlier, namely, whether to take the putative content of sensory experience to be narrow or broad.27 (These points are applicable mutatis mutandis to the other debates.) So let us then ask: Does conjoining either a narrow or a broad conception of the putative content of sensory experience to Non-Relational
Intentionalism make it a deep ontological and epistemological alternative to the Adverbial Theory?

Not surprisingly, conjoining it to a narrow conception does not, for on it sensory experience remains essentially complete independently of its intendment’s actually existing in extra-mental reality. By taking sensory experience to be essentially intra-mental and never an experiential acquaintance with its intendment, the Cartesian Problematic of the Adverbial Theory goes unresolved.

Perhaps more surprisingly, conjoining it to a broad conception does not either. Here’s why. Non-Relational Intentionalism holds that the intentionality of sensory experience is not itself a real relation to its intendment. If conjoining it to a broad conception of content is to be coherent, this central point must be upheld. This entails that, on this view, whatever real relation sensory experience has to its intendment must be something other than its intentionality (such as a causal relation, or relation of causal covariation, or a teleological relation). Even if we suppose that sensory experience is existentially dependent on its intendment (at least in non-hallucinatory cases), the experience itself is still, on this view, a mere effect or mental event at the end of a causal, or causal-covarial, or teleological chain. The intendment, even if taken to be individuative of the experience, is not itself a constituent thereof; and the experience is not itself an experiential acquaintance with the intendment or anything in extra-mental reality. Thus, while conjoining a broad conception of the putative content of sensory experience to Non-Relational Intentionalism may appear to offer a deep ontological and epistemological alternative to the Adverbial Theory, this appearance is illusory. In reality, it does not.
4. Conclusion

Does Intentionalism deliver what it purports to offer, namely a viable alternative to the traditional trinity of theories of sensory experience? In light of the considerations adduced above, and despite the increasing prominence it now enjoys, I conclude that it does not. My overarching argument for this conclusion may be encapsulated as a dilemma:

On Intentionalism, the intentionality of sensory experience is either a real relation or not. If it is, Intentionalism either collapses into a version of the Sense-Datum Theory or the Theory of Appearing or avoids so collapsing at the cost of a dubious ontology and an implausible account of our cognitive contact with the world. If it is not, then although Intentionalism differs conceptually from the Adverbial Theory, it fails nonetheless to deliver a deep ontological and epistemological alternative to the latter. It would not be far from the truth to say it delivers an Adverbialism réchauffé.
Notes

1 Plato has Socrates articulate an extreme rationalism of this sort in the *Republic*.
2 For classic discussions, see Coffey (1917) and Lovejoy (1930).
3 Many use the term “Representationalism” for the view I call “Intentionalism,” following Crane (2001). In this article I will use the latter and not the former, for the term “Representationalism” is historically tied to Indirect Realist views according to which what we are immediately aware of in sensory experience are ideas or sense-data. Note that Intentionalism as I am using the term here is part of a broader view also known as Intentionalism according to which anything mental is also intentional. I shan’t be discussing this broader view here.
4 In vision, for instance, light quanta are emitted or reflected from objects, and it takes time for them to travel through space and be processed by the visual system. Seeing therefore always involves some time-lag. This undercuts what Naïve Realism seems to suggest, namely that vision is instantaneous.
5 Since Galileo, numerous considerations have been raised for thinking that secondary qualities such as colors, odors and the like cannot be objective features of external physical objects. See Perkins (1983) for a clear development of this line of criticism. See Le Morvan (2000, 2004) for a response.
6 There are two main kinds of Causal Arguments against Naïve Realism (in fact, against any form of Direct Realism). The Causal Mediation Argument points out that sensory experience involves a long and complex series of causal events and concludes that sensory experience of external objects can never be direct. Such an argument is vitiated by its conflation of causal and cognitive directness. The cognitive directness of sensory experience is compatible with its causal indirectness. The Proximate Cause Argument points out that veridical experience and hallucination can have identical proximate causes, and concludes that neither can be an awareness of external physical objects. This argument is question-begging insofar as it holds that the same proximate neural cause is sufficient for sensory experience.
7 Concomitantly, the Sense-Datum Theory holds that mind-independent physical objects are never immediate or direct objects of awareness. On the Indirect Realist version of the theory, we are directly aware only of sense-data in sensory experience, and indirectly aware of the physical objects that may cause them. On the Idealist and Phenomenalist versions of the theory, we are immediately aware of physical objects, but only because they are constructions of actual sense-data (as on Idealism) or of actual and possible sense-data (as on Phenomenalism).
8 See chapter 7 of his not yet published manuscript *The Manifest*. See also Alston (1999), and Le Morvan (2000).
9 Footnote 39 of Chapter 7 of Johnston’s *The Manifest*.
10 The two main kinds of Adverbial theory, the Event Theory and the State Theory, differ concerning whether sensory experience is to be understood as an event in, or state of, the subject of experience.
11 For the Relational view, see especially Campbell (2002); for the Disjunctivist view, see especially Martin (2006), McDowell (1998), and Child (1992). Gram (1983) and Kelley (1986) defend versions of the Theory of Appearing although they don’t call them such. I offer a defense of the Theory of Appearing in my manuscript *Appearance and Experience: From Realism and Back Again* (work in progress).
12 Though the terms “Direct Realism” and “Naïve Realism” are sometimes used interchangeably, it’s a mistake to conflate the concepts expressed by these terms.
13 Options include the following: taking hallucinations to be extreme external illusions where external objects or events appear radically different than they are (e.g., a region of air appearing to Macbeth like a dagger); taking them to consist of an awareness of mental images; and taking them to be extreme internal illusions—that is, where something internal to the body appears other than it is and external to the body.
14 On this matter, see Le Morvan (2005)
15 Moreover, unless the aboutness of sensory experience involved an awareness of this relatum as it does on the Theory of Appearing, Relational Intentionalism would lack a differentia distinguishing sensory experience from non-experiential intentional states.
16 See the discussion in Johnston (2004) of such a view.
17 Consider how strange would be the claim that in sensory experience we’re intentionally related only to the instantiated universal but not the object or event which instantiates it.
18 See Johnston (2004) for a discussion of such a view.
19 Again, it would be strange to claim that in sensory experience we’re intentionally related to the bundled trope but not to the object with which it is bundled.
20 That is, on these hybrids, all cases of sensory experience essentially involve awareness of tropes: bundled ones in veridical cases and unbundled ones in non-veridical cases. True, these hybrids do differ from non-hybrid versions of the Theory of Appearing and the Sense-Datum Theory modulo how the latter have standardly treated non-veridical sensory experience; once more, however, these hybrids fail to offer genuine alternatives to the non-hybrids as far as veridical sensory experience is concerned, and commit us to a dubious ontology and epistemology as far as non-veridical sensory experience is concerned.
21 Particularly extreme versions of Propositionalism were proffered by Armstrong (1961, 1968) and Pitcher (1971) who argued that sensory experience is essentially, and nothing more than, an organism’s way of acquitting beliefs about the world or environment. Such a view has few adherents today. For a telling criticism, see Vision (1997).
22 See especially Searle (1983) on this matter.
23 McDowell (1994), and Brewer (2000) provide prominent defenses of Conceptualism, but it is less clear that they adhere to Non-Relational Intentionalism.
24 See Cussins (1990), Crane (1998), and Heck (2000), for different elaborations on the notion of non-conceptual content.
25 Note that one can reject Another variety of Non-Conceptualism distinguishes between the sensory experience of objects and the sensory experience of facts, and holds that whereas the latter requires the deployment of concepts the former does not. See for instance Dretske (1969) and Alston (2005).
26 As Crane rightly notes, “the Direct Realist theory and the Sense-Datum theory are both intentionalist theories are also intentionalist theories: each of them holds that the mind is directed on real objects in acts of perception.” (2001, 138)
27 To his credit, Lycan is a notable exception. He acknowledges that his version of Non-Relational Intentionalism is, as he puts it, “deep-syntactically a form of adverbialism.” (1996, 84)
Works Cited


Clark, R. ‘Objects of Consciousness: the Non-Relational Theory of Sensing’.


-----. ‘Phenomenal Externalism or If Meanings Ain’t in the Head, Where Are Qualia?’


Johnston, M. *The Manifest*. (not yet published manuscript)


Porter, Steven L. *Restoring the Foundations of Epistemic Justification*. Lanham, MD: