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# Intentionality, Politics, And Religion

Mohammad Azadpur<sup>1</sup>

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The idea that intentionality is the distinctive mark of the mental or that only mental phenomena have intentionality emerged in the philosophical tradition after Franz Brentano. Much of contemporary philosophy is dedicated to a rejection of the view that mental phenomena have original intentionality. In other words, main strands of contemporary philosophy seek to naturalize intentionality of the mental by tracing it to linguistic intentionality. So in order to avoid the problematic claim that a physical phenomenon can in virtue of its own physical structure mean exactly one thing, they adopt a form of holism. Nevertheless, contemporary philosophers are attracted to a naturalist story about the emergence of the logical space. In this work, I am interested in the naturalism and the holism advocated by Wilfrid Sellars and developed by the Pittsburgh school. It is not only a view that I find theoretically attractive but I also admire it for its fecund engagement with the history of philosophy, especially the work of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and, as I will argue, Abū Naṣr Muḥammad al-Fārābī (Alfarabi).

**Keywords:** Intentionality, politics, religion, Franz Brentano, Wilfrid Sellars.

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## Introduction

Franz Brentano, in his influential *Psychology from An Empirical Standpoint*, claims that every mental phenomenon is characterized by intentionality—that is, by the inclusion of an object within itself (Brentano 1995, 88). From this formulation, the subsequent tradition of philosophy has extracted three main characteristics of intentionality:<sup>2</sup> (1) A mental phenomenon is about or directed toward an object. (2) Objects of mental phenomena are characterized by intentional inexistence. (3) Intentionality is the distinctive mark of the mental.

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1. Professor, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, USA, email: [azad@sfsu.edu](mailto:azad@sfsu.edu)

2. I have isolated these with the help of three sources: Jacob (2008), Black (2010), and Haugeland (1990).

In this short essay, I begin by considering the third characteristic more carefully. There is a naturalistic tendency in contemporary philosophy to reject the traditional interpretation of this characteristic—that is, the view that mental phenomena have intentionality intrinsically and other phenomena (e.g., a sentence) have it derivatively. In other words, some strands of contemporary philosophy seek to naturalize intentionality of the mental by deriving it from linguistic intentionality. But in order to avoid the problematic claim that a physical phenomenon can, in virtue of its own physical structure, mean exactly one thing, they adopt a form of holism; to put it less controversially, they claim that the intentionality of an individual verbal state or occurrence depends on the naturally emergent pattern into which it fits, and this pattern is that of the logical space (and distinguished from that of the space of natural sciences) (Haugeland 1990, 386). In this work, I am interested in the naturalism and the holism advocated by Wilfrid Sellars and developed by the Pittsburgh school.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, I would like to consider the continuity of this position with the work of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and, as I will argue, Abū Naṣr Muḥammad al-Fārābī (Alfarabi).

For Sellars and the Pittsburgh school, intentionality is a result of acquiring an autonomous standing in the logical space of reasons, which is in turn made possible by initiation into a language. I submit that both Hegel and Alfarabi claim that a certain political order, anchored in religion, is presupposed for the emergence of, and our proper situation in, the logical space. Hegel's historical account identifies the required order with the political appropriation of Christianity by the later Roman Empire. Alfarabi, on the other hand, draws on Islamic theories of prophecy to advocate an ideal state governed by a philosopher-prophet-ruler. I will conclude that whereas Hegel's view remains constrained by the development of thought within the borders of Europe, Alfarabi's position is more inclusive.

### **Intentionality and the Logical Space of Reasons**

In “Being and Being Known,” Sellars celebrates a form of abstractionism he finds in Thomas as a precursor to his own view that the intentionality of mental states is inherited from those of overt linguistic utterances (Sellars 1963, 49-50; 57-58); nevertheless, Sellars suggests that Thomas remains committed to a problematic account of the relation between the intellectual order and the real order.<sup>2</sup> Sellars

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1. Haugeland (1990) discusses several possible approaches to intentionality in contemporary philosophy and distinguishes Sellars's neo-pragmatism from neo-Cartesianism of Fodor, Field and Pylyshin, and the neo-behaviorism of Quine, Dennett and Stalnaker.
  2. On the merits of Sellars's criticisms of Aquinas, see King (2010, 25-44). Also I am not suggesting that the treatment of the relation between Avicenna's account of intentionality and that of Thomas Aquinas is not interesting itself; it is just beyond the narrow scope of this short paper.

then argues that to extirpate himself from this problematic view, Thomism needs to abandon the idea that sensations have intentionality (1963, 45-46). To be sure, Sellars embraces an isomorphism between sensations and the external world, but that isomorphism, Sellars thinks, is non-intentional (1963, 56-57). Therefore, for Sellars, intentionality is non-relational and is determined by the normativity of the space of significances (i.e., the space of reasons) (1963, 58).

Sellars's central thesis, which he calls "psychological nominalism" elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> is that the intentionality of mental states (i.e., the aboutness of thoughts) is derived from the meaningfulness of overt linguistic utterances. In other words, Sellars offers a naturalist account of the emergence of the intentionality of mental states from the proprieties that are a feature of overt linguistic utterances. John Haugeland refines this account by showing that it presupposes a natural conformism, which is "not mere imitativeness (monkey see, monkey do), but also censoriousness—that is, a tendency to see that one's neighbors do likewise, and to suppresses variation" (Haugeland 1990, 404). Such "wired in" conformism produces patterns of cultural propriety (normativity) which legitimate the proper use of linguistic expressions. The intentionality of mental states is, in turn, inherited from the normativity of overt linguistic utterances.

Despite their insistence that norms emerge from a natural/linguistic basis, Sellars and Sellarsians advocate an absolute autonomy for the normative order. Haugeland, for instance, maintains that the norms which regulate moves in the space of reasons are not causal regularities nor social conventions. In regard to the latter, he says: "The difference between norms and conventions lies in this explanatory appeal: conformism (to norms) does not presuppose any prior beliefs or preferences on the part of individual conformists, and hence the persistence of norms cannot be explained in terms of agents' interest maximization or rational choice" (Haugeland 1990, 407). John McDowell, another Sellarsian, also echoes this account of norms when he calls the space of reasons *sui generis* and identifies it as the realm of freedom (McDowell 1994, 5). Norms do not cluster into independent spaces but they hang together holistically by virtue of their logical connections.

### ***Méditations Hégéliennes***

In his seminal work, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Sellars calls his philosophical project a *Méditations hégéliennes* (Sellars 1997, 83), and his successors also manifest a deep interest in the philosophy of Hegel. Hegel is interesting to the Pittsburgh school partly because of their commitment to psychological nominalism—the view that all awareness

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1. "[A]ll awareness... is a linguistic affair" (Sellars 1997, 63).

is a linguistic affair (Sellars 1997, 63). Assigning original intentionality to language conforms to Hegel's view that reason is embodied concretely in human life. Another less explored reason for the attractiveness of Hegel is his account of how an initiation into language, a potential rationality, is fully realized in human freedom. Freedom for Hegel is action in accordance with reason; he writes that "man is an object of existence in himself only in virtue of the Divine that is in him, that which was designated at the outset as *Reason*, which, in view of its activity and power of self-determination, was called *Freedom*" (Hegel 2001, 48). To act rationally is to act from norms or prescriptions that have a purely rational grounding, or to put it in Sellarsian terms, it is to be responsive to the norms of the space of the reasons. Only when one acts from the laws of reason, then one is raised from the determined state of being an animal and enters on the path of freedom: "Only that will which obeys law is free ... When the subjective will of man submits to laws – the contradiction between Liberty and Necessity vanishes" (Hegel 2001, 54). For Hegel, achieving the status of a fully rational agent is mediated by submission to the laws of the state. Hegel writes: "In the history of the world, only those people can come under our notice which form a State. For it must be understood that this latter is the realization of Freedom, i.e. of the absolute final aim, and that it exists for its own sake ... all the worth a human being possesses – all spiritual reality, he possesses only through the State" (Hegel 2001, 54). By being loyal citizens of the State, human beings become spiritual beings, participating in the highest freedom. Furthermore, for Hegel, religion is integral to the foundation of the state: "the position thus assigned to Religion supposes the State already to exist; and that subsequently, in order to maintain it, Religion must be brought into it – in buckets and bushels, as it were – and impressed upon people's hearts" (Hegel 2001, 67). For Hegel, the practice of religion serves the state because it fortifies the citizen's resolve in being dutiful and that ultimately facilitates freedom, the ability to abide by rational laws.

### **Alfarabi on Initiation into the Space of Reasons**

As we have seen, to occupy an autonomous standing in the space of reasons requires responsiveness to norms or prescriptions that are categorical—that is, empirically unconditioned. This, for Alfarabi, is cultivated by a religious training, because religion's unshakeable laws "imitate" the categorical norms of reason:

Now when one acquires knowledge of the beings or receives instruction in them, if he perceives their ideas themselves with his intellect, and his assent to them is by means of certain demonstrations, then the science that comprises these cognitions is *philosophy*. But if they are known by imagining them through similitudes that imitate them, and assent to what is imagined of them is caused by persuasive methods, then the ancients call what comprises these cognitions *religion*. (Alfarabi 2011, 68)

Religion, then, provides the novice with an appropriate orientation in the space of reasons by persuasion and the use of imagination. As the initiation proceeds, the knower gets closer to the real:

Now these things (God, world, human beings, and politics) can be known in two ways, either by being impressed on their souls as they really are or by being impressed on them through affinity and symbolic representation. In that case, symbols arise in man's minds, which reproduce them by imitation. The philosophers in the city are those who know these things through strict demonstration and their own insight; those who are close to the philosophers know them as they really are through the insight of the philosophers, following them, assenting to their views and trusting them. But others know them through symbols which reproduce them by imitation, because neither nature nor habit has provided their minds with the gift to understand them as they are. Both are kinds of knowledge. (Alfarabi 1985, 280)

The grasp of religious knowledge prepares the knower for the actualization of her intellect, so that she is not merely responding to the unarticulated content, given in unrefined experience, for the sake of animalistic concerns. Religion helps the knower to look away from such concerns.

Alfarabi also relates religious norms to the apparatus of the state. For him, the ideal philosophical sovereign is also a religious lawgiver:

When this [perfection] occurs in both parts of his rational faculty, namely the theoretical and the practical rational faculties, and also in his representative faculty, then it is this man who receives Divine Revelation, and God almighty grants him Revelation through the mediation of the Active Intellect ... Thus he is ... a wise man and a philosopher and an accomplished thinker who employs an intellect of divine quality, and through the emanation from the Active Intellect to his faculty of representation a visionary prophet: who warns of things to come and tells of particular things which exist at present. This man holds the most perfect rank of humanity and has reached the highest degree of felicity ... This is the sovereign over whom no other human being has any sovereignty whatsoever. (Alfarabi 1985, 245-46)

For Alfarabi, philosophy precedes religion in time (Alfarabi 2011, 45), and the initiation into the philosophical mastery of the space of reasons is reflected in the political and religious norms (instituted ideally by a philosopher-prophet-king), such that everyone within the community is given a chance to acquire such mastery.

## **Conclusion**

Reflection on Hegel and Alfarabi in the context of the approach to intentionality advocated by the Sellarsian Pittsburgh school, allows us to appreciate the depths of the latter in its ability to retrieve the insights

of the past masters. In this short paper, I have examined briefly some of the political and religious dimension of these insights. I presented two conflicting accounts. Hegel, as we saw, maintains that human capacity for reason is a divine spark within him and is actualized by means of his participation in a state, anchored by religious law. For Hegel, the evolution of the state achieves a culmination in the Roman appropriation of Christianity, and the latter bears its fruit in the modern European political culture. Alfarabi, in agreement with the Hegelian view, maintains that the state and its appropriation of religion are necessary conditions for the realization of the human capacity for reason and the attainment of the philosophical life. However, he is more inclusive in that he—in keeping with Islamic principles of a prophetic state—gives an outline of an ideal state instituted by a charismatic philosophical ruler, yet remains just aloof enough to accommodate other possible actualizations of the ideal. This pluralism is what I find more appealing than Hegel’s Eurocentric vision.

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