

INTERVIEW WITH TIM CRANE

Tim Crane received his PhD from the University of Cambridge. He is currently Knightbridge Professor of Philosophy in the University of Cambridge and a fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge. Crane's main areas of research are in the philosophy of mind and in metaphysics. The following interview cover various aspects of his research in the philosophy of mind (as well as related issues in metaphysics and in the scientific study of mind): intentionality and intentionalism, perceptual experience and the Given, physicalism, emergence and cognitive science.

1. Intentionality and Intentionalism

Praxis: In "Intentionality as the Mark of the Mental" (1998) and *Elements of Mind* (2001b) you defend Brentano's thesis that all and only mental phenomena are intentional.

You respond to standard counter-examples to Brentano's claim, such as an „undirected“ anxiety, that when we properly characterize the phenomenology of such states, they can in fact be recognized as displaying the core features of intentionality, as conceived in contemporary analytic philosophy of mind. Taking what Searle (1992) calls "aspectual shape" to be one of those features, you write that in an episode of "undirected" anxiety, the world is presented "as" threatening or "under the aspect" of being threatening. Accordingly, you suggest, even undirected anxiety can be recognized as an intentional mental state.

Assuming that Brentano's thesis is an attempt at distinguishing the mental from the non-mental in an informative or non-trivial way, one might think that the notion of intentionality should itself be intelligible without recourse to the notion of mentality. But can we make sense of the notion of aspectual shape without presupposing the notion of mentality or, in fact, the notion of *intentionality*? To take the example of anxiety: is it possible to make sense of the notion of the world's being presented under the aspect of threat without assuming a certain "background" of intentionality, such as that the subject has a certain *concern for* or *cares about* herself or her integrity?

TC: It's a good question. But I now feel that there is no good reason why we should be able to make the notion of intentionality intelligible wholly independently of the notion of the mental. We come to these matters with a half-formed grasp of the things we are trying to unify with a more exact or precise account, description or 'definition'. Someone who had no idea of what it was we were trying to get at with the notion of intentionality would be unlikely to grasp the notions of aspectual shape either (i.e. the notion of something seeming a certain way, but where we can also make sense of the very same thing seeming a quite different way). Both notions presuppose the idea of seeming, and seeming is an irreducibly mental phenomenon. (I say something about a similar issue in my reply to Anders Nes in *Analysis* 63: 2008, 215-8.)

You are quite right about anxiety. Anxiety is always anxiety for oneself, and in that sense is 'directed at' oneself (in that way it differs from depression, which I believe is 'directed at' the world). I don't think this raises any dangerous circularity, since anxiety is a *form* or *kind* of intentionality, so of course it cannot be understood independently of general intentional notions. So you are right that you cannot make sense of anxiety without presupposing the basic intelligibility of intentionality. This is like saying, you cannot make sense of moral value without presupposing the basic intelligibility of value.

In general: I don't think we should be looking for reductive definitions or necessary and sufficient conditions which satisfy the strictest standards of non-circularity. With this subject-matter, we will not find them. We should instead be looking for conceptual and metaphysical elucidation or illumination. It is hard to define what this is, exactly, but I suggest that you know it when you see it!

Praxis: Why should philosophers look for a feature that is distinctive of mental phenomena in the first place? Or, putting the question in your own words, "why do we need a mark of the mental at all"?

TC: Well, in the first place, there is an intuitive distinction between certain processes and states within us: some of them seem intimately tied up with our nature as subjects or persons or agents, while others do not. The circulation of my blood, or my digesting my dinner – these are not things that are tied up with my agency (though of course my agency may well presuppose them). My blood circulating is not, we normally think, a mental process, while my sensing of the position of my limbs is.

What is this difference? Is it, as Descartes argued, that the difference consists in the way these things are known? Or is it because of the presence of some distinctive non-material quality in these processes? Or does it derive from something else? These seem to me to be real philosophical questions.

There is a broader issue, I guess. Part of the point of the concept of the mental is that it draws a line between those things which due a certain kind of concern or care – creatures which feel, think, suffer and so on – and those things which are not.

Praxis: In various publications (e.g. “The Intentional Structure of Consciousness”, 2003b) you have also defended the claim that the phenomenal character of experiences – what it is like to have them – is to be explained in terms of its intentional properties. In contrast to other varieties of “intentionalism” about phenomenal consciousness, you hold that phenomenal character should be explained in terms of *both* the attitude (or “mode”) and the intentional content of such experiences.

An important aspect of your proposal is that the distinction between attitude and content, which we are familiar with from standard examples of propositional attitudes (belief, desire), can be generalized to experiences. You characterize the intentional content of an experience in terms of the presentation of its intentional object – what the experience is directed at – under a certain aspect (see above), rather than, as on a traditional understanding of intentional content, in terms of what is ascribed by a “that”-clause. You then introduce the attitude or mode as what relates the subject to that content.

Is the distinction between content and attitude, as you draw it, a neat one?

TC: I’ll wait to see what turns on this question before answering it!

Praxis: Consider emotional experiences, such as, for example Oedipus’ delight that he married Jocasta. (This example is borrowed from Peter Goldie.) Given the traditional understanding of content as what is attributed by means of a “that”-clause, “that he married Jocasta” would be (or express) the content of the experience. This understanding seems also to be in line with your view of content: “That he married Jocasta” characterizes the object of Oedipus’ delight (the fact or event of having married a particular woman) under a certain aspect (rather than another): Oedipus would not be delighted (in fact, is not delighted, when he finds out) that he married his mother. The relation between

Oedipus and that content – being delighted – would be, both on the traditional view and your view of intentionality, the attitude or mode, I take it.

TC: That's how I see things, yes.

Praxis: Now, in Oedipus' episode of delight, not only is his marriage to Jocasta apprehended by him as a marriage to Jocasta (rather than as a marriage to his mother), but that content itself is presented to Oedipus under the aspect of being delightful (compare the way in which the world in anxiety is presented as threatening or frightening). One might think that this further "aspectual shape" is in fact just a different way of characterizing the attitude of Oedipus' experience. It does not seem to be part of the content of the experience, when content is conceived in the traditional sense: Oedipus is not delighted *that his marriage to Jocasta is delightful*. But it would seem to classify as content on your view: it seems characterizable as an aspect under which the object of Oedipus's experience – the fact of him being married to Jocasta – is apprehended by him. Would it then be legitimate, on your view, to regard this as an additional intentional content? Do experiences have multiple contents (as you suggest in your forthcoming paper "The Given", to which we return in question 4.)?

TC: It's an interesting point, but I would not want to think of this as an *additional* intentional content. My fundamental starting-point is the idea of an intentional object – what is loved, feared, delighted in and so on. In this case, I'd say the object of Oedipus's delight is the fact that he married Jocasta. So I would not say, as you do, that the *content* is 'presented under the aspect of being delightful' since that would suggest that the object of his delight is the content, rather than the fact. (While one could have contents as the objects of certain acts, this is not such a case.)

Praxis: Does the notion of aspectual shape, as you use it, blur the distinction between attitude and content?

TC: I don't think so. I hope that I can use these three notions - object, content and attitude (or mode) to characterise the structure of all intentional experiences, and I think to do this they need to be quite distinct. But I think what is central to my view is that the phenomenology of experience can be characterised in terms of content and attitude/mode.

It's true that objects can be presented to us with a certain affective or emotive 'aspectual shape': in fact, I now think that much of our perception is like this. A face can seem kind or

frightening, a room cosy or familiar. This is part of the content of the experience – the way in which the experience represents the object. So I would say that when Oedipus delights in the fact that he has married Jocasta, his experience – I’m assuming that it is an episodic, experiential delight – has a content which has an affective aspect as well as a cognitive aspect. And as you say, this is different from saying that the content is the proposition that *my marriage to Jocasta is utterly delightful!*

In the terminology of ‘The Given’, the content which has this affective aspect must be content in what I call the ‘phenomenological’ sense. The ‘multiple contents’ view uses the notion of content in a ‘semantic’ sense. I accept that there are multiple semantic contents, but the idea of ‘aspectual shape’ is supposed to be getting at the phenomenological content. Semantic contents are, as it were, ways of describing the phenomenological content.

2. Perceptual Experience and the Given

Praxis: One much-discussed view of yours is that perceptual experience has non-conceptual content. Your main argument for this view (in “The Nonconceptual Content of Experience”, 1992) draws on a notion of concepts as the constituents of intentional states that make it possible for these states to be inferentially related to other intentional states. As you observe, perceptual experiences, in contrast to beliefs, seem to be inferentially “isolated” from one another (and from other intentional states): for example, we do not deduce the *perception of a as being F and G* from the perception of *a as F* and the perception of *a as G*. Rather, the only way to perceive *a as F and G* is to perceive both properties simultaneously. You conclude that perceptual experiences do not involve constituents that would allow them to enter inferential relations, and therefore lack conceptual content.

TC: That was the view I proposed in that paper, yes.

Praxis: The notion of a concept has been much debated in the last decades and there seem to be other ways of understanding this notion which support the view that perceptual experience has conceptual content. For example, one might argue that simply seeing a particular object *as F* involves seeing it as having a property instantiated by many other things, and that this type of generality is sufficient for attributing conceptual content to the experience (appealing to a broadly Kantian understanding of concepts).

What are the merits of thinking of concepts in terms of inferential capacities or relations?

TC: I was led to think about concepts in terms of inferential capacities by asking the

question: what is the point of saying that someone has the concept of a pig, as opposed to merely saying that they have beliefs about pigs? I proposed that the point was to do with the idea of reasoning: if someone could employ lots of different propositions about pigs in reasoning, then this was a reason to think of them as having a distinctive conception or concept of a pig. This would explain, I thought, the generality which philosophers have traditionally wanted from concepts.

The proposal you mention, that seeing something as an *F* involves some kind of generality because you see it ‘as having a property instantiated by many things’, might also deserve the name of an account of conceptual perception (and to this extent I accept that there is an element of creative stipulation in this debate). But I’m not sure I understand the proposal – one would have to be able to see something as having a property which *can* be instantiated by many things (since one might see only an instance of only one property). But how can you see something as having such a higher-order property? I am not opposed to the idea that one can see things as having capabilities or as actable on (in the style of Gibson and those inspired by him like Noë). But seeing them as being *possibly instantiated by other things* would require a clearer grip on the problematic notion of instantiation than (surely) most perceivers have.

In general, I don’t think there is much to be gained by focussing on the ‘seeing as’ idiom. My interests are now more in the psychology of perception and in questions about whether ideas like categorical perception can be made to work, or the extent of cognitive penetration in perception.

Praxis: Is the dispute about how to understand the notion of a concept and, derivatively, that of the (non-)conceptual content of experience ultimately a terminological one?

TC: No, for the reasons stated above! (Not *ultimately*, that is – there are real substantive issues here to do with the role reasoning and background knowledge play in perception. But there are terminological decisions we have to make before getting to those issues.)

Praxis: Much of the debate on whether perceptual experience has conceptual or nonconceptual content is concerned with the question how to account for the intuition that perceptual experiences provide us with reasons for empirical beliefs. As some, in particular John McDowell, insist, we cannot make sense of experiences having an impact on rationality without capacities that belong to rationality, i.e. conceptual capacities, being

already at work in these experiences. To think otherwise, McDowell argues, is to fall into the “Myth of the Given.”

In the first part of your forthcoming paper “The Given” you adjudicate a dispute between McDowell and Charles Travis on how to “avoid” the Myth of the Given. On Travis’ view (2007), perception of the environment does not draw on conceptual capacities; we draw on conceptual capacities only in forming judgments about what perception presents us with. You argue that McDowell (2008a) is wrong to claim Travis’ view is a version of the Myth: Travis does not say that merely being perceptually presented with items in the environment justifies us in making empirical judgments about them; it is only by deploying concepts and recognizing what is presented as instances of certain kinds that we are justified in making such judgments.

TC: Exactly, yes.

Praxis: But one might think (as McDowell in fact himself does; cf. his reply to Travis in 2008b) that this does not quite suffice to avoid the Myth. Bringing to bear concepts on what is perceptually manifest is a case of rationally responding to (or ‘making up one’s mind’ about) how things are in the perceptual environment. But making up one’s mind in this way is itself to be rationally constrained and hence requires the manifestation of the environment in perception to already draw on conceptual capacities. In other words, according to McDowell, Travis still falls into the Myth of the Given inasmuch as experience is said to have an impact on or make the world bear on rationality without drawing itself on rational capacities (cf. 2008, 266f.).

How far “out” does reason reach on your view?

TC: As you might expect, I don’t see the force of this objection to Travis. Experience does bear on rationality, in something like the way Travis says. It has an impact, yes, but this impact need not be taken up by the reasoning subject. There is a sense in which this impact can be the same and a sense in which it can be different, whether or not it is taken up. I used to call the sense in which it is the same the ‘non-conceptual’ content.

One way for the experience to have an impact on rationality is for subjects to think about some aspect or object or property of their experience, and identify it with a concept they have (maybe by using a word), and then go on to make a judgement about how things seem to them. This seems to me to be well-described as ‘conceptualising’ the content of

experience, a content which is not conceptualised by the experience itself (in the sense of ‘conceptual’ I mentioned earlier). I don’t see why drawing the conceptual/nonconceptual divide in this way gives rise to any of the problems McDowell describes.

But I now think that in order to accept this general picture, we do not have to deny that there is any cognitive penetration of experience, or say that experience is entirely non-conceptual. There is a non-conceptual component to experience, but experience can have conceptual content too. Here I agree with Christopher Peacocke.

Praxis: Is there a Myth of the Given to be avoided the first place?

TC: Well, I must admit I find this topic very confusing and I don’t share many of Sellars’s assumptions. Perhaps I should just say here that my inclinations in epistemology have always been externalist, tending towards a head-banging reliabilist end of things. So maybe it’s not surprising that I don’t feel the myth of the given to be one of my problems!

Praxis: In the remainder of your forthcoming article you use the term “given” to characterize the phenomenal content of a perceptual experience (the portion of perceptible reality “given” to a subject in experience) and contrast this with its propositional content (what we, in some sense, “bring” to the experience), which is, on your view, an abstraction from or a “description” of its phenomenal content that figures in our practice of attributing intentional states. Phenomenal content, you suggest, is subjective and can be modelled on the notion of a Fregean idea, whereas propositional content is public and abstract, that is, at the level of Fregean sense. Interestingly, you take your view of phenomenal content as roughly on a par with McDowell’s (2008a) view of perceptual content. Yet you do not address the role concepts play in establishing the unity of what is given in perceptual experience on McDowell’s view, as what makes something a unified impression of a certain portion of the perceptible environment. It would seem that concepts, at least on a common view you seem to share in earlier writings (e.g. 1992), figure at the level of Fregean sense or propositional content (which is not to say that they can only figure in propositional contents, as McDowell would deny). If McDowell is right, then it seems that your distinction between phenomenal and propositional content is maybe not that clear-cut: roughly speaking, phenomenal content essentially draws on concepts, the ‘building blocks’ of propositional content.

Thus, do you think that the unity of phenomenal content can be established non-conceptually?

TC: The short answer: yes. The long answer would take time, and unfortunately I don't have anything like a detailed version of it. But the basic idea is that the 'unity' of phenomenal content is not a propositional unity: it doesn't use predication, copulation, variable-binding, quantification etc. (Here I think I would agree with McDowell.) Rather, it is an empirical question what perceptual 'classifications' our minds use in order to present the phenomenal unity of the perceived world. I would look to psychology and cognitive neuroscience for the classifications and categories that the visual systems use. (Here I think I would disagree with McDowell, at least insofar as I understand his comments on non-propositional content.) How these classifications are unified is another (very puzzling) matter, and one of the (many) things that goes under the heading of the 'binding problem' in cognitive neuroscience. But whatever it is, the unity of phenomenal content cannot be like the unity of a claim or a statement or a proposition.

3. Physicalism, Emergence and Cognitive Science

Praxis: If only mental phenomena are intentional, do you think that this endangers physicalism as a thesis about the nature of the mental?

TC: Short answer? No. The intentional mental phenomena could be realised or identical with or supervenient upon certain very special portions of the physical world. Whether they are or not is another question, but intentionality is no barrier in general to physicalism. (I say something about this in my paper, 'Intentionality as the Mark of the Mental' on my website.)

Praxis: In your article "Subjective Facts" (2003a), you argue that recent attempts by physicalists to reject Jackson's (1982, 1986) so-called "Knowledge Argument" have failed. Moreover, you argue that Jackson's argument actually shows that there are such things as "subjective facts". Ultimately, you argue that this is something that the physicalist can, and should, accept; that the physicalists can (and should) accept that knowledge derived from subjective experience *alone* is possible, and that they can (and should) deny that all facts are physical facts. This seems quite counter-intuitive, given what one would „prima facie“ take physicalism to be committed to.

Can you tell us how it is possible for a physicalist to accept subjective facts?

TC: Perhaps I put my conclusion in a way that made it look more counter-intuitive than it really is (this is one way to try and get attention for your ideas!).

As I explain in the paper, the notion of ‘fact’ that the knowledge argument needs if it is to be intelligible at all is the notion of a true proposition or a truth. It is only facts in *this* sense that are learned, and it is stated in the story that Mary learns a fact. (Facts in the other sense – ‘truth-makers’ – are not learned, they are not the objects of knowledge. Otherwise in knowing one true identity claim about an object, we could know them all.)

Again, the notion of ‘physical’ that the argument needs to use in order to work does not just encompass physics (since a ‘dualist science’ could be learned in the black and white room). But it also encompasses any knowledge which does not require that a subject have any specific kind of experience – I call this ‘objective knowledge’. The knowledge which Mary acquires is ‘subjective knowledge’ or knowledge of subjective facts – i.e. truths which, in order to know them, you have to have had some specific kind of experience. This is the knowledge that Mary might express by saying ‘red looks like this’. The fact that Mary has this knowledge is plainly not incompatible with the basic idea behind physicalism (e.g. all objects or properties are physical).

So all that I mean by saying that this fact is not a physical fact is that if you can knowledgably say ‘red looks like this’, this requires that you have had a certain specific kind of experience. Otherwise you could not have this knowledge (know this fact). Physical facts – truths – do not require that one has any specific kind of experience in order to be known. That’s why I claim that Mary can know the whole of physics in the black and white room.

Perhaps I should have expressed my conclusion by saying that physicalists can accept that Mary learns a new proposition when she sees red for the first time, because such a proposition is ‘subjective’ in the above sense. And physicalism should not be committed to the view that there are no subjective propositions.

Praxis: In your work, you also investigate the relationship between varieties of physicalism known as “non-reductive” physicalism and a view of the mind, according to which mental properties “emerge” from their physical substrates (“The Significance of Emergence” (2001a) and, more recently, “Cosmic Hermeneutics vs. Emergence: The Challenge of the Explanatory Gap” (2010)).

As you characterize these views, non-reductive physicalism and emergentism both claim that mental properties are distinct from physical properties, even though mental properties are properties of physical objects. As you write, they yet differ in that non-reductive physicalists endorse, while emergentists reject, the view that truths about mental phenomena must in principle be explicable in terms of truths about physical facts (broadly speaking).

In both articles, your central claim is that non-reductive physicalists have traditionally wanted to distinguish themselves from emergentists, but that it is not obvious that they can in fact do so. Yet, as far as I can see, your account of the notion of emergence has changed in the meantime. While in “The Significance of Emergence” (2001) you argue that emergent properties are best characterized in terms of the possession of distinct causal powers by an object, that is, powers distinct from the causal powers of its low-level physical properties, in “Cosmic Hermeneutics vs. Emergence” you propose what looks like a more epistemic reading, according to which, roughly speaking, emergent properties are precisely those kinds of properties that are not explicable in principle in terms of truths about physical facts, that is, truths about their physical substrates.

What is the reason for this change in your understanding of emergence?

TC: Thanks for the extremely careful reading of my papers.

In the earlier paper I argued that emergentists *were* committed to downwards causation, but that non-epiphenomenalist, non-reductionist physicalists were so committed as well. So I described the difference between emergence and non-reductive physicalism in terms of their epistemic/methodological attitude. In the later paper, I simply describe one manifestation of this difference in epistemic attitude: that non-reductive physicalists must hold that there is at least an explanatory reduction of the mental. In other words, they must bridge the explanatory gap if they are not to become emergentists. I don't see a big change here, only a shift of emphasis.

Praxis: In “The Significance of Emergence” you argue that non-reductive physicalism threatens to collapse into emergentism since non-reductive physicalists commit themselves to mental properties having distinct causal powers. More recently, you argue that this threat arises since it is not obvious that non-reductive physicalists can in fact live up to their explanatory demand, given certain epistemic arguments against physicalism

(that is, Joseph Levine's (2001) "explanatory gap"-argument).

TC: That's right. I argue that all physicalists must be reductive in one way or another (either ontologically or explanatorily).

Praxis: However, does a non-reductive physicalist have to endorse this demand? In "The Significance of Emergence" you suggest that she might in fact be mistaken to do so, while in "Cosmic Hermeneutics vs. Emergence" you no longer recommend an emergentist attitude towards the mental.

TC: Yes, I see what you mean. This might look as if different problems were being identified as the problem for physicalists, but in fact it is the same: how should they distinguish themselves from emergentists? In the earlier paper, I came out with it and said: they shouldn't, they should join the emergentist camp. In the later paper, I conceded that if they were looking to do this, they should try and solve the explanatory gap problem. Simply refusing to do this would be to give in to emergentism. I made a few suggestions as to how they might do this, but I did not endorse non-reductive physicalism. In fact, I still believe the emergentism of these two papers to be the best naturalistic metaphysics of the mind.

Praxis: What role, if any, does cognitive science play in the study of the mind, in particularly in studying consciousness and subjectivity? More particularly, what do you think is the relevance, if any, of neuroscience in the study of our inner life?

TC: A huge question to finish with! Cognitive science – or cognitive psychology, or cognitive neuroscience, whatever you want to call it – has the same subject-matter as the philosophy of mind. The discoveries of cognitive science have had – or should have had – huge influence on the philosophical study of the mind. To take one example among many, of the kind of thing I mean: the studies of inattentional blindness and change blindness simply cannot be ignored by philosophers of perception. Or, at the more neuroscientific end, what to make of Benjamin Libet's experiment is a major question for philosophers. Of course, there are many other examples. No philosopher of mind can afford to ignore psychological discoveries about their subject-matter. (Which is not to say that there are not more purely philosophical problems too – I think of the debate about physicalism and dualism as one of them: it's not something which should trouble a psychologist. But this is not to dismiss the debate.)

In recent years I've been working more and more on how our understanding of the mind is enhanced by looking at discoveries in psychology and cognitive neuroscience. I see my interests moving much more in that direction, and away from the metaphysics of mind (as befits a real emergentist, I would say!).

One area, though, where I feel not much progress has been made by cognitive scientists is in trying to understand consciousness – in the sense of ‘solving the problem of consciousness’, the ‘last barrier to a scientific understanding of ourselves’ etc. There is a lot of wild speculation and a lot of bad philosophy. This is partly because they have sometimes taken on uncritically some very unclear philosophical notions – e.g. ‘qualia’ – and then gone on to theorise using these notions. I sometimes think: you might think that the philosophy of consciousness is a mess, until you start looking at what the neuroscientists start saying about it. Some philosophical discipline really would help here. Just as philosophy of mind must learn about the discoveries of cognitive science, so neuroscientists should take things a bit more slowly and try and figure out why the philosophers – whom they often dismiss – say the things they do.

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