



Critical Review of ‘Allama Tabataba’i’s View of Intentionality

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Abstract

Intentionality, as a fundamental concept in the philosophy of mind, is essential to understanding how mental states are directed toward objects, concepts, or states of affairs. This article examines the theory of intentionality presented by ‘Allama Tabataba’i, with a focus on his Islamic philosophical framework. The research begins by defining the problem of intentionality, which concerns the nature, possibility, and content determination of mental states. We highlight how Tabataba’i’s grounding of intentionality in mental existence and immaterial knowledge provides a distinct perspective compared to contemporary naturalistic approaches. The study employs a qualitative, analytical, and

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comparative methodology, examining primary texts from Islamic philosophy, including works by Avicenna, Mullā Ṣadrā, and ‘Allama Tabataba’i, alongside modern Western discussions on intentionality. Through this critical lens, we identify Tabataba’i’s key contributions: the essential revelatory character of knowledge, the abstraction process in content determination, and the inseparable connection between mental existence and intentionality. The research findings reveal that while Tabataba’i’s model offers a metaphysically robust explanation of intentionality, it encounters significant challenges when evaluated in the context of contemporary cognitive science. Critiques include the lack of empirical testability, potential conceptual ambiguity for modern scholars unfamiliar with Islamic metaphysics, and the absence of a clear mechanistic explanation that aligns with materialist paradigms. Nevertheless, the article underscores the innovative nature of Tabataba’i’s approach in bridging classical Islamic thought with modern philosophical discourse. It also suggests potential interdisciplinary dialogues, especially with phenomenological perspectives that similarly emphasize the inherent directedness of consciousness. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of intentionality and open new avenues for future research on the integration of metaphysical and empirical frameworks in the philosophy of mind.

Keywords

Intentionality, Content Determination, Knowledge, Mental Existence, ‘Allama Tabataba’i.

Introduction

In the philosophy of mind, our thoughts and mental states are marked with two properties: qualia and intentionality (Jacquette, 2009, p. 195). Intentionality is the abstract relation of aboutness in which thoughts are directed at intentional objects (ibid). Some contemporary philosophers of mind who believe in eliminativism or reductionism ultimately deny these two basic properties (ibid). However, assuming that these are genuine properties of our mental states, questions will arise about their possibility and how they relate to each other. Intentionality as an important mental property is at the heart of debates in the philosophy of mind. The philosophical study of this concept in the contemporary philosophy of mind dates back at least to a half a century ago. It was introduced by philosophers such as John Searle, Fodor, and Putnam.

The problem of intentionality is the second most difficult problem in the philosophy of mind after the problem of consciousness, which was discussed in various dimensions. In fact, it is the other side of the problem of consciousness. Just as it is hard to see how the matter inside our skull might be conscious or its interactions might create consciousness, it is particularly hard to see how the matter inside the skull might refer to or be about something in the external world, or such a reference might arise from its actions and reactions.

Against the naturalization of intentionality and materialism about consciousness, there is the view of Medieval scholastics, Descartes, and Muslim philosophers that consciousness and mental images are immaterial or detached from matter. In their own words, scholastics and Muslim philosophers prove the property of intentionality for mental images, showing that it is essential to them.

Research Background

Research on intentionality has developed significantly since Franz Brentano's (1874) identification of intentionality as the defining characteristic of mental phenomena. Husserl (1913) further advanced the concept by integrating it into his phenomenological framework, emphasizing the directedness of consciousness. In the analytic tradition, John Searle (1983) introduced intentionality as part of his theory of speech acts and the mind, while Fred Dretske (1981) and Ruth Millikan (1984) proposed naturalistic accounts of mental content grounded in biological and causal relations.

While these theories have largely focused on naturalistic and empirical dimensions of intentionality, Islamic philosophers, particularly Avicenna and Mullā Ṣadrā, explored the concept through the lens of mental existence (*wujūd dhihnī*). However, as noted by Shakeri (2010), there has been limited engagement with contemporary issues of intentionality within Islamic philosophy.

Recent works have sought to bridge this gap. Esfandiar, Najafi, and Zakeri (2021) examined Tabataba'i's perspective on intentionality through his philosophical foundations, offering insights into how his metaphysical principles contrast with materialist theories. In another study, Najafi and Esfandiar (2022) analyzed the significance of intentionality in Tabataba'i's thought with reference to causal and final theories of content. These contributions provide valuable groundwork for understanding the distinctive features of Tabataba'i's approach.

The present article not only builds on the foundational work of 'Allama Tabataba'i but also provides a critical perspective on his views in relation to contemporary theories of intentionality. While Western philosophers often ground intentionality in empirical and

causal frameworks, Tabataba'i's reliance on the immateriality of knowledge presents a fundamentally different starting point. Critics may argue that his metaphysical approach lacks empirical testability, a concern commonly raised by proponents of physicalist theories like Dretske and Millikan.

However, the innovative contribution of the present article lies in its systematic integration of Tabataba'i's philosophical insights with contemporary discourse. By contrasting his metaphysical principles with naturalistic theories, we demonstrate the potential for Islamic philosophical perspectives to contribute to current debates about mental representation and content determination. The article further highlights the essential nature of knowledge as inherently intentional, challenging assumptions of reducibility to physical processes.

On this account, the problem of this article consists of two main questions:

1. How is intentionality possible if knowledge is something immaterial or detached from matter?
2. How is the content of our intentional states determined? In other words, how does our consciousness refer to something beyond itself?

Alternatively put, the main questions of the article are the possibility of intentionality and its determination (that is, having particular contents). Our contribution in this article is to look for a new answer to these questions based on 'Allama Tabataba'i's philosophical theories and grounds. Although the answer is close to causal theories of content, there are several ways in which they differ, particularly in that our answer does not reduce intentionality to a natural physical property of the mind, whereas all causal theories seek to make such a reduction. Intentionality is an eminent property of

“knowledge” and “consciousness” as a reality detached from matter, and hence, it has nothing to do with natural physical properties.

1. The Concept of Intentionality

The concept of intentionality is a significant concept in the philosophy of mind. It is about a non-physical property of the mind, which provides objections to eliminativist and reductionist materialistic approaches to the mental. The concept is so significant that Brentano has introduced it as a mark of the mental (Brentano 1995, 92). In the contemporary philosophy of mind, the concept of “intentionality” is used to elucidate the essential characteristic of the mental, by which mental states are directed at or about something (Hickerson 2007, 1). For example, when I believe that Rostam and Sohrab have combatted each other, my belief is about the combat between Rostam and Sohrab. Or when I decide to vote in this year’s presidential elections, my decision is about voting in the elections. Intentionality is a main property of consciousness. According to Husserl, consciousness is always consciousness of something; that is, it always aims at something (Husserl, 1913, p. 84). Husserl further developed Brentano’s notion of intentionality by grounding it within his phenomenological method, emphasizing the intentional structure of experience and the correlation between acts of consciousness and their objects.

The term does not explicitly appear in the work of ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. It was first introduced by Medieval scholastics, and was later deployed and meticulously studied by Brentano, a nineteenth-century philosopher and psychologist, and his students. For Brentano, intentionality is the main characteristic of the mental and our consciousness, which distinguish them from the physical (Brentano 1995, 90-92). The intentional character of the mind allows us to have representations of the world and allows our thoughts

to have contents and to show the actual world. This characteristic even enables our minds to think about things that do not exist (Zalta 1988, 10). Put in a nutshell, intentionality is a property that allows us to have knowledge of the world (Kim, 2010, p. 17).

2. Mental Content and Intentionality

Content is what is represented by our mental representation (Mandik 2010, 31). For example, when I have a general concept or a sensory experience, the concept or experience has a content in the sense that it includes intentional mental circumstances that represent something. In other words, content is what our mental states are about. Mental representations are among the mental states that possess contents. Our thoughts, beliefs, desires, hopes, and fears are about something; for instance, our thought about “John is here” or my belief that “it will rain tomorrow.”

There are various philosophical problems about content. For example, can content be physically explained? Alternatively put, can contentfulness be identified to something physical or is it indeed non-physical?

Another problem is how the particular content of a mental state is determined: Why must a particular thought have such and such a content and refer to such and such a thing? The two questions seem interrelated, since any explanation of content is an explanation of how content is determined.

As for mental content, theories of its nature are called content theories, which aim to account for how an intentional mental content be about something (ibid). Contemporary theories of content tend to be naturalistic; that is, they attempt to explain mental content and its intentionality in natural and physical terms.

On this account, the relation between intentionality and mental content comes to light. In this article, we provide an answer to the question of the possibility of intentionality and determination of the mental content from ‘Allama Tabataba’i’s perspective. The two questions are important in that philosophical efforts in the contemporary philosophy of mind are largely devoted to them, as we can see in the works of philosophers like Fodor, Dretske, Millikan, and others (e.g., see Millikan, 2009, p. 394; Fodor, 1987, p. 97).

3. Mind

A fundamental distinction to identify types of entities is in terms of “mentality” and lack of mentality (Kim, 2014, p. 34). The term “mentality” is used to refer to exactly the creatures (such as animals and human) who have states like anger, pain, and pleasure or have sensory perception, concepts, and propositional attitudes. They are contrasted to physical states and properties that can be explained in physical terms. Accordingly, mentality is the ability to feel, think, and have mental states (Lowe, 2010, p. 6). On this account, the philosophy of mind is a philosophical inquiry into things with mentality in that they have mentality (ibid). In the literature, however, the concept of “mind” is sometimes considered a substance separate from the body (particularly in versions of substance dualism) (Kim, 2014, pp. 36-40), although this approach to the concept of mind is criticized by most physicalists. Accordingly, the *mental* or *mental states* are what characterize humans or any other conscious being and have basic mental features such as qualia or intentionality and are not primarily explainable in physical terms. “Having a mind” might just be thought to be a property or capacity that only human beings and certain evolved animals possess. To say that something “has a mind” is to categorize it as a species that has the ability for certain behaviors and functions

(feeling, perception, memory, learning, argument, consciousness, action, etc.) (ibid, p. 42).

In the final analysis, the mental might be reduced to the physical, might be physically explainable, might be a higher-level physical property of certain living organisms, or might ultimately be a property distinct from physical properties.

In the literature, the distinction is often made between the physical and the mental, rather than the external and the mental. Whenever there is talk of the external world, it often refers to the natural material world that is based on fundamental physical laws and elements. However, Islamic philosophy often adopts a peculiar approach to the mind, not as the soul that is considered one of the two aspects of existence (in double divisions of existence). We should thus address how Muslim philosophers conceive of “mind” and “mental existence” to elucidate the difference between approaches to the “mind” in the two philosophical traditions: contemporary philosophy of mind and Islamic philosophy.

3.1. Mind in Islamic Philosophy

Existence is primarily divided into mental and external (Şadr al-Muta'allihīn, 1981, vol. 1, p. 263). Mental existence is contrasted to external existence, where the former is a way of something's existence, which does not have its expected effects, unlike the latter. Of course, mental existence is comparative; that is, in comparison to the external existence, which it represents, the mental existence has the expected effects, although it has its own effects and excludes nonexistence, and in this perspective, it is a sort of external existence (Tabataba'i, n.d.(b), pp. 17, 256). Accordingly, the aspect of being compared to the external reality is deemed essential to the mental existence, and hence mental existence characteristically represents what is beyond it, without

having its expected effects. On this picture, every mental existence necessarily represents “something” (actual or hypothetical).

Accordingly, the mind is not a container of perceptions, and the mental is not what exists in the brain or the head or an immaterial container called the “mind.” Note that “external realm” and “external existence” are identical, and the external realm is constituted by external existences in the sense that when it is said that something exists in the external realm, it does not mean that the external realm is a container for, and an entity beside, other objects, but in fact, the external realm is nothing but those external existences (Sabzawāri, 1990, vol. 2, p. 150). Likewise, when we talk of the mind, we just mean the representational character of mental images. Accordingly, mental existence, as opposed to external existence, is an existence that is characteristically compared to the external realm, and hence, mental existence by character represents what is beyond it, without having its effects.

This clarifies the external character as well: it does not mean what is outside of the human existence (human body or soul), but what has the expected effects. Accordingly, something within the human soul can be external (e.g., a pain we feel), and it cannot be judged as mental merely because of inner existence or being a sort of perception.

4. Knowledge and Mental Existence in Islamic Philosophy and Its Relation to “Intentionality”

Perhaps one of the most evident concepts to us is that of “knowledge,” which consists in clarity or obviousness. When we say, “I know such and such,” it means that such and such is obvious to me. It is a major challenge for philosophical schools of thought to account for the

nature of knowledge and the process through which knowledge is acquired by individuals. Now the question arises: What relation is there between knowledge and the problem of intentionality?

It should be noted that the term “intentionality” does not explicitly appear in Islamic philosophy. However, in debates on mental existence and knowledge, there is discussion about the existence or actualization of epistemic forms in the mind and the way they reveal the external realm, as well as their relational (intentional) nature (Shakeri, 2010, p. 27). In their exploration of general problems of existence, Muslim philosophers divide existence into mental and external. They discuss mental existence to explain the nature of knowledge and demonstrate that knowledge is not merely a relation to the object of perception or a duplicate thereof. Rather, it is through the “meaning” or “concept” of the external that we intend the external existence.

Avicenna’s passages in his *al-Ta’līqāt (Annotations)* imply that the mind has the property of being directed at something, whether it actually exists in the external realm or not (Avicenna, 1983, p. 95). From this perspective, the problem of mental existence as the comparative aspect of our epistemic forms to the external realm (Tabataba’i, n.d.(a), vol. 1, p. 264) is intrinsically tied to intentionality.

Mullā Ṣadrā, in his *al-Asfār al-Arba’a (The Four Journeys of the Soul)*, further developed the discourse on mental existence by introducing the principle of substantial motion (*al-haraka al-jawhariyya*). He argued that knowledge is not a static relation but a dynamic, existential transformation of the knower. For Ṣadrā, mental existence represents the continuous movement of the soul towards higher levels of understanding and knowledge, a process intrinsically tied to the representational and intentional nature of mental forms

(Şadrā, 1981, vol. 3, p. 297). He emphasized that mental images are not merely abstract reflections but real, albeit immaterial, existences that reveal external realities.

Accordingly, the contributions of Avicenna, Mullā Şadrā, and ‘Allama Tabataba’i together provide a coherent framework for understanding knowledge and its intentional character. Avicenna laid the groundwork by introducing the concept of mental existence as a representational reality. Şadrā advanced this idea through his theory of substantial motion, highlighting the dynamic, process-oriented nature of knowing. Tabataba’i later extended these ideas, emphasizing the essential revelatory nature of knowledge and its intrinsic connection to intentionality.

Thus, in Islamic philosophy, knowledge and mental existence are fundamentally intertwined. Mental existence, as conceived by Avicenna, Şadrā, and Tabataba’i, is not merely a passive reflection of external objects but an active, intentional presence that reveals and relates to external reality. This perspective offers a distinct alternative to contemporary materialist approaches to intentionality, which often seek to naturalize mental content within physical and causal frameworks.

5. An Account of Intentionality from ‘Allama Tabataba’i’s Perspective

We can go through certain steps based on ‘Allama Tabataba’i’s theories to infer his explanation of intentionality.

5.1. Theory of Mental Existence

Muslim philosophers distinguish mental and external existences to solve problems of the ontology of knowledge. This is therefore a major problem of Islamic philosophy (Motahhari, 1985, vol. 1, p. 161). We

should first account for the two notions of “mental-external” and “representation.”

A) Mental and External

Mental existence, as opposed to external existence, is a way of something's existence, which does not have its expected effects. Mental existence is a comparative existence; that is, it lacks certain effects in comparison to the external existence it represents, although it has its own effects. Accordingly, mental existence is comparative to, and representational of the external reality, where this representational character is its essential property.

B) Representation

In the case of concepts and mental images, representation is to indicate and display something through a mental concept. The human mind is constantly engaged in making pictures and deriving concepts, whereby it represents its internal and external findings. When faced with a reality, the mind characteristically derives a concept and makes a picture from it (Niazi, 2008, p. 150).

There are two varieties of representation: intrinsic and conventional. The former is when something's essence is such that it has the character of mirroring. That is, its essence displays something else, without this depending on any conventions on our part or being figuratively attributed to this (mental concepts are essential representations of their representata).

Conventional representation is like the representation of words, letters, mathematical signs, signposts, etc. Such representation is based on conventions agreed by people. Although words represent concepts by convention, concepts essentially represent their meanings.

It is crucial to distinguish the two kinds of representation, which implies that mental concepts are not just “symbols” for truths.¹

5.1.1. Formulating the Theory of Mental Existence

As noted above, existence qua existence is primarily divided into mental and external. In his account of mental and external existences, ‘Allama Tabataba’i says: “it turns out that quiddities have mental existences from which their effects do not follow, just as they have an external existence from which the effects follow, and with this it the division of existents into external and mental becomes clear” (Tabataba’i, n.d.(c), 35).

Mental and external existences are by nature (or quiddity) identical. In fact, they are two modes of the existence of one and the same thing. That is, one reality or quiddity exists in two realms: the mental and the externa. This is grounded in the “primacy of existence” (*iṣālat al-wujūd*) and its corollaries, which imply that existence has primacy in that it is identical to the aspect in which the expected effects follow, whereas a quiddity (*māhiyya*) is equally related to having or not having effects. Thus, the quiddity can exist in the two mental and external realms and remain the essence it was.

5.1.2. Nature of Mental Existence and Knowledge

When we gain knowledge of things, their quiddities are obtained by us through mental existence; that is, a quiddity that has another mode of existence that lacks the expected external effects.

1. Representation in the case of epistemic forms and concepts is mere presentation, which differs from judgmental representations that imply judgments about truth and falsity. Negligence of this difference has led to misunderstandings. See Niazi (2008).

This mental existence has effects of its own, and is called “knowledge.” For instance, the mental image of the human being is a mental existence that lacks the effects of an externally existing human being. It should be noted that mental existence is not subsumed under any category because for something to be included in a category, it does not suffice for the defining limit of the thing to be true of it. It must have the external effects as well, and since mental existence lacks the relevant effects, it is not subsumed under any category (Tabataba’i, n.d.(c), p. 36). This is why it is said that the mental quiddity—namely, the quiddity that mentally exists—only has the concept of the relevant categories, period. That is, the mental human being is just the concept of the human being (human as primarily predicated), not its instance.

To recapitulate, the theory of mental existence, as advocated by Muslim philosophers, holds that in the process of knowing the reality, what we grasp is the nature of things, albeit with a different mode of existence (which lacks external effects; that is, mental existence). In other words, our knowledge-by-acquisition of the external reality is our knowledge of the quiddities of things, and the mental and the objective are identical with respect to the quiddity (Tabataba’i, n.d.(c), p. 34).

5.2. Essential Revelatory Character of Knowledge

‘Allama Tabataba’i believes that the nature of knowledge is revelatory; that is, it discloses the external reality. It is therefore impossible to conceive the sort of knowledge that is not diaphanous or does not reveal the external realm, as it is impossible to conceive a revelatory or diaphanous piece of knowledge without having anything external that is revealed by it. In his discussion of mental existence, too, ‘Allama Tabataba’i notes that since mental existence is by nature

compared to the external reality, it is essentially representational of something beyond it. It is therefore impossible to have mental existence—a representation—without a representum (something that is represented). That is, there must always be an actual or hypothetical external existence that corresponds to our mental image (ibid, p. 38). He writes: “mental existence characteristically represents what is beyond it, without the effects of the representum following from the representation” (ibid).

On this account, mental existence, as opposed to external existence, is always compared to, and representational of, something insofar as it is mental existence; that is, *the comparative or other-directed aspect, or being intentional, is the nature of the mental dimension*. It might thus be said that, for ‘Allama Tabataba’i, the intentionality of mental existence is essential to us, mental existence is always compared to the external, and without such comparison, mental existence goes away. This is what it means for mental existence to represent what is beyond it. Accordingly, mental existence or knowledge has an intentional representational existence, revealing something beyond it.

5.3. Immateriality of Knowledge

In Islamic philosophy, external existence (that has the expected effects) is generally divided into material (attached to matter) and immaterial (detached from matter) (See Ibn Sīnā, Book of Healing, 103; Ṣadr al-Muta’allihīn, 1981, vol. 1, p. 284; Tabataba’i, n.d.(b), p. 86). Material existence is what appears in the background of the primary matter (or *hyle*) and has potentiality (Ṣadr al-Muta’allihīn, 1981, pp. 261-262), while an immaterial existence is not essentially attached to matter and does not involve potentiality. Now the question is: To what kind of existence do our perceptual forms belong? Are our perceptions

material entities that are located in our brains or are they functional properties of our brain? Or are they detached from matter, and material things only count as conditions and predispositions for their actualization (passively, not actively)?

Our answer to this question specifies our approach to the problem of intentionality. Most non-eliminativist philosophers of mind claim that intentionality is something natural and physical (based on materialism about consciousness), but Sadraean philosophers in the Islamic tradition, including 'Allama Tabataba'i, believe that all perceptions are immaterial, maintaining that materialism about consciousness leads us nowhere and suffers from major contradictions. Accordingly, our epistemic forms are non-material realities detached from matter. Now what is the essential property of immateriality? Major philosophers in the Islamic tradition assert that immaterial entities are always present, and are indeed identical to presence, unlike material entities (Ibn Sīnā, 1996, vol. 2, pp. 382-391; Ṣadr al-Muta'allihīn, 1981, vol. 3, pp. 297-300; Tabataba'i, n.d.(c), p. 239). And since presence implies revelation or disclosure, which is identical to knowledge, an immaterial entity has an epistemic existence, and in fact, it is identical to knowledge and revelation. On this account, knowledge can only obtain in the immaterial realm, and only an immaterial entity can be revelatory.

5.4. Grounding Knowledge by Acquisition in Knowledge by Presence

As we noted above, for 'Allama Tabataba'i, knowledge is by nature revelation and disclosure, which are associated with presence. Parts of a scattered entity are absent from each other, even if they are connected, and absence is incompatible with revelation. In contrast, "presence" is an essential property of immaterial entities, and hence,

the nature of knowledge goes back to the presence of the known, which can only occur in the immaterial realm. In other words, as noted in the third step, the knower and knowledge are both immaterial. Accordingly, any piece of knowledge by acquisition, which is indeed to find the concept and image of things by the soul, will be grounded in, and arise from, knowledge by presence.

According to ‘Allama Tabataba’i, given the diaphanousness and revelation of knowledge and perception, it is necessary to arrive at a reality; that is, in the case of any piece of knowledge by acquisition, there is a piece of knowledge by presence. This is because any putative piece of knowledge or perception that has the property of revealing the external reality or the property of diaphanousness must match the external reality without having its expected effects, and thus we inevitably arrive at an entity that has the effects, which it matches. That is, we find the reality through knowledge by presence, from which knowledge by acquisition is derived either directly (what is known by presence without having the expected effects) or indirectly through being manipulated by the perceptive faculty. This is sometimes exemplified by sensory perceptions that exist in senses with their reality, and are obtained by the perceptive faculty, and sometimes by non-sensory perceptions (Tabataba’i, 2008, pp. 80-81). On this account, it is knowledge by presence that turns into knowledge by acquisition by being divested of the expected effects.

5.5. ‘Allama Tabataba’i and Intentionality

Given the four steps outlined above, which are derived from ‘Allama Tabataba’i’s philosophical grounds (although they accord with Mullā Ṣadrā’s views in his Transcendent Philosophy, the essential revelatory character of knowledge in the above terms as well as the grounding of knowledge by acquisition in knowledge by

presence are contributions of 'Allama Tabataba'i in his *Principles of philosophy and the method of realism*), we can formulate the possibility of intentionality and the way in which mental content is determined from 'Allama Tabataba'i's viewpoint as follows.

In response to how intentionality is possible, contemporary philosophers have often tried to naturalize meaning and intentionality in terms of materialism about consciousness or its elimination and analysis (based on physicalism). Nevertheless, 'Allama Tabataba'i rejects the materiality of knowledge altogether, maintaining that all kinds of perception are immaterial. Accordingly, all epistemic forms we possess are detached from matter, and immaterial entities reveal and represent, or are directed at, other things, in virtue of their "presence." To illustrate, note that all of our perceptual forms are detached from matter (even if they might enjoy lower degrees of immateriality), and since immaterial entities are present with their essences, unlike material entities that are not scattered in time and place, and hence they are not absent from themselves, they can be "present" and they can "possess," in which case they reveal and are revealed, where this revelation is the essential character of knowledge. In other words, a substantial immaterial entity is knowledge, knower, and known at the same time, and epistemic forms (if they are believed to be accidents [*a'rāḍ*] and psychological qualities) are knowledge and known by essence.

Knowledge as an immaterial entity is essentially revealing; that is, the epistemic form of what represents cannot exist without what is represented, and the mental existence (what is compared) cannot exist without an externally existing entity (that to which it is compared). In fact, mentality or knowledge has a representational mirroring character, in that it shows something by character. Accordingly, any of our epistemic forms represent, and are directed at,

something. Moreover, since in the process of knowledge by acquisition, the nature of the external existence becomes known to us, the mental existence (representational aspect of the epistemic form) and external existence are identical with respect to their nature or quiddity, and in this way, our epistemic forms become directed at the external reality.

On this account, the first question about intentionality—the question of its possibility—finds a plausible answer: any epistemic form essentially reveals and represents something, where such representation in knowledge by acquisition is grounded in knowledge by presence. Since this epistemic form is immaterial, and it is present to an immaterial substance (the soul), and material entities are essentially present, then their revealing character arises from their essence, instead of being separate from, and attached to, it. In fact, as established in Transcendent Philosophy and endorsed by ‘Allama Tabataba’i, existence is identical to presence, and presence is identical to immateriality and knowledge (Tabataba’i, n.d.(c), pp. 239-240; Šadr al-Muta’allihīn, 1981, vol. 6, p. 340). Accordingly, it turns out that knowledge as immateriality and presence is revelation. In other words, revelation or intentionality are essential to, and necessary for, knowledge, and hence, it is absurd to try to prove it.

The question of the possibility of intentionality of epistemic forms would only arise if they were material entities, since such entities are distinct from each other in the quiddities (or natures) and existences. That is, the question of how intentionality is possible would be a difficult problem on the assumption that knowledge is something material, in which case knowledge and the known would be distinct. This is because such a distinction either in existence or in quiddity would imply that no piece of knowledge could represent any

external existence. This would amount to the denial of knowledge of reality, which is the false sophistry.

A close look at the above analysis yields an answer to the second question as well: How is the content of intentional consciousness determined? Any epistemic form necessarily has its own representum and is conceptually the same as the external entity. For example, the epistemic form of an apple in my mind is the externally existing apple by primary predication; that is, it has its concept. And since any knowledge or perception has the property of revealing the external reality and is indeed an image thereof, we must have arrived at an entity that has the expected effects and to which the form corresponds; that is, we must have grasped the reality through knowledge by presence, from which knowledge by acquisition is derived either directly or indirectly (Tabataba'i, 2008, p. 80). Accordingly, what represents is determined and comes to have a particular content in just the same way in which what is known by presence is determined; that is, it has the same limitations and conditions (quiddity). The answer to the question of how content is determined is thus as follows: mental existence, which has an intentionality toward, and is a representation of, an external existence, is determined in terms of a determination that externally exists.

To see this, we need to distinguish particular and universal concepts. A truly particular concept, either sensory or imaginative, cannot be true of more than one individual instance due to its connection to sensory devices (in sensory concepts) or its dependence on sensory concepts (in imaginative concepts). What determines the content of such concepts, as per the fourth step above, is the external reality that causes the appearance of this concept in our minds in one way or another (which might be an unmediated cause as in sensory concepts or a mediated cause as in imaginative concepts, which

remain in the mind after having been disconnected from the sensory apparatuses and faculties), although the causation is preparatory, rather than genuine, since ‘Allama Tabataba’i believes that the genuine cause of all varieties of knowledge is the imaginal or intellectual truth, to which the soul is identical (Tabataba’i, n.d.(c), p. 244).

The epistemic form of a particular rose in our soul refers to a particular externally existing rose, rather than any other roses or entities, because that epistemic form was derived from an external entity—the particular rose—and conceptually represents that entity (as we explained how this occurs and knowledge by acquisition is formed). In other words, any concept possesses a peculiar content and reports a feature in its representum or reference. This is the truth feature, which is what determines the particular content of a concept.

As for the universal concept, ‘Allama Tabataba’i’s theories imply that perception of universals (that is, quiddity-based concepts) are always preceded by particular perceptions that come from senses or knowledge by presence (Tabataba’i, 2008, pp. 65-66). If this being *preceded* by a perception is considered a kind of causation (even a preparatory sort of causation), then universal concepts will also be determined in terms of their external causes¹ (albeit by mediation of particular concepts). Universal concepts will also involve a content based on their peculiar truth features. Indeed, such features that are grounded in their abstraction from the represented reality determine their content.

We can even say that any concept—whether particular or universal, and whether quiddity-based or non-quiddity-based—comes to have a specific content given how it was (directly or indirectly)

1. See Tabataba’i, n.d., pp. 240-250.

abstracted from its reference—as discussed in the debate in Islamic philosophy on first intelligibles (*al-ma'qūlāt al-ūlā*) and second intelligibles (*al-ma'qūlāt al-thāniya*),¹ and is thus distinguished from other concepts. The content of a concept is determined by the reality from which it is abstracted. If the relevant epistemic form is a universal quiddity, then it represents a specific (species-based) quiddity, and if it is abstracted from a particular external reality, then it represents an individual quiddity (such a concept is abstracted from a particular human person, which represents the individual quiddity of that person).

An objection that might arise here is that this analysis seems to apply only to quiddity-based concepts (“first intelligibles”), whereas a large portion of our concepts and epistemic forms are logical and philosophical concepts, which are not quiddity-based, and thus we cannot say that they are abstracted from particular concepts, which are in turn grounded in the external reality.

We can reply to this objection by scrutinizing how these concepts represent. These concepts might represent the existence aspect; that is, their instances are matters of the reality of existence and pure externality, or they might represent the nonexistence aspect; that is, they are matters of pure falsity, or they might be logical concepts that characterize our mental concepts. Given the following premise, the problem of intentionality in that case can be solved in a similar vein:

The main features of mental existence consist in (i) their representational character, and (ii) failure to have the expected effects.

1. In the fifth article of *Principles of philosophy and the method of realism*, and in *Nihāyat al-ḥikma*, 'Allama Tabataba'i elaborates upon this; see Tabataba'i, 2008, pp. 79-90; n.d.(c), pp. 256-259.

As we see, there are concepts of second intelligibles that represent and do not have the expected effects of their instances.

Accordingly, we can say that second intelligibles are indeed mental existences. The only remaining question is how these concepts relate to their instances, if they do not correspond to them?

The way in which these concepts represent their references is “ostensive and demonstrative.” That is, the concept of cause, for instance, merely demonstrates a manner of existence and indicates the aspect of “that on which something depends,” without having a share of its reality. These second concepts or intelligibles result from an “intellectual operation” on first intelligibles (the quiddities), displaying the external or mental properties and relations of the first intelligibles, which is why their representation of their references is subsequent to the representation of the quiddities. In other words, these concepts represent the external reality by virtue of quiddities, and the way in which their content is determined is grounded in the manner in which they are abstracted from the reality, since each of these concepts has its own truth aspect or feature (based on its abstraction from the external or mental reality), and it is this truth aspect—that is, the feature in virtue of which the concept is true of its instances—that determines the content of the concept.

Concepts are therefore epistemic forms, which essentially reveal and represent. In this way, our answer to the first question (how is intentionality possible?) will be true of these concepts as well. The only difference is that the way in which their content is determined—that is, their reference to a particular thing—is through an intellectual construction or abstraction.

The upshot is that ‘Allama Tabataba’i’s theory of content and

its determination seems to be a sort of causal theory, since he believes that content is determined in terms of the (external-mental or constructed) reality from which it is abstracted.

So far, we have provided an answer to the problem of intentionality about epistemic forms, but what about beliefs, thoughts, doubts, and in general propositional attitudes that are often deemed intentional in the literature?

Many of these are, in terms of Islamic philosophy, cases of knowledge by acquisition (such as beliefs, doubts, thoughts, and impressions), and the above solutions work in their case. In some of these cases that are combinations of various epistemic forms and judgments (such as judgmental beliefs), the overall proposition has an intentionality toward, and represents, its reference or the external reality, in addition to its individual parts, and the way in which it is determined and represents depends on how its parts are determined and how they represent (for instance, “John has come,” “Jones is standing,” and “the red apple is delicious” have different references because the component parts of each—subjects and predicates—have different representations). The intentionality of propositions is determined by what they represent; that is, each proposition has its own intentionality and reference given what it represents (as elaborated in the case of concepts). In other words, the particular content of each proposition is determined by its constitutive concepts and the specific relation between them.

To recapitulate, all of our knowledge by acquisition about sensory and intellectual concepts as well as quiddities, second intelligibles, and various veridical propositions, have an intentionality in the sense of referring to the external reality and having a representational character.

6. Critical Perspectives on ‘Allama Tabataba’i’s View of Intentionality

6.1. Comparative Insights: Islamic and Western Approaches

While ‘Allama Tabataba’i presents a robust, metaphysically grounded account of intentionality, some might argue that his perspective remains distant from contemporary Western discussions, which often seek empirical and naturalistic explanations. For instance, philosophers like John Searle and Fred Dretske emphasize biological and functional explanations of intentionality, contrasting with Tabataba’i’s reliance on immateriality as the essence of knowledge. Searle’s notion of *biological naturalism* suggests that intentionality is rooted in the physical structures of the brain, making it an emergent property of neural processes. In contrast, Tabataba’i’s theory of mental existence, grounded in metaphysical principles like the primacy of existence (*iṣālat al-wujūd*), appears less accessible to empirical methodologies.

The metaphysical assumptions here may limit the applicability of his theory to modern cognitive science. Critics might argue that the lack of engagement with neurobiological perspectives makes Tabataba’i’s view less relevant to fields like cognitive neuroscience and artificial intelligence, where physicalist frameworks dominate. Additionally, the abstraction-based mechanism of content determination might be seen as insufficiently detailed for explaining the complexities of representational states in the human mind.

6.2. Challenges and Potential Weaknesses

- **Empirical Gaps:** Critics may point out that Tabataba’i’s theory relies heavily on metaphysical premises, such as the immateriality of knowledge, which are difficult to reconcile with contemporary neuroscience and psychology. The dominant paradigm in cognitive science views intentionality

as a computational or neural phenomenon, often modeled through connectionist frameworks and symbolic representations. From this perspective, the idea of an immaterial, intrinsically representational mental existence might be seen as philosophically elegant but scientifically untestable.

- **Linguistic Limitations:** The absence of the term *intentionality* in classical Islamic philosophy might make cross-cultural philosophical dialogue more challenging, even if the concept is implicitly present in discussions of mental existence (*al-wujūd al-dhihnī*). Western scholars unfamiliar with the nuances of Islamic metaphysics might find the parallels with concepts like *intentional inexistence* or *representational content* less intuitive.
- **Causal Theory of Content:** Although Tabataba'i's account bears similarities to causal theories of content found in contemporary analytic philosophy, his rejection of material causes for mental representations diverges significantly from the physicalist assumptions of figures like Dretske. Critics might question whether this dualistic orientation adequately addresses the causal connections between mental states and the external world.

6.3. Interdisciplinary Opportunities

Despite the epistemological and methodological differences, Tabataba'i's emphasis on the mind as inherently representational opens the door for engaging with debates in contemporary philosophy of mind. For instance, his views on the abstraction of universal and particular concepts could offer fresh insights into discussions about conceptual categorization in cognitive science. Cognitive scientists

investigating conceptual structures might find the notion of *knowledge by presence* particularly intriguing as an alternative framework for understanding non-symbolic forms of knowledge, such as intuitive or perceptual understanding.

Furthermore, his theory could resonate with phenomenological approaches that emphasize the intrinsic directedness of consciousness, as seen in the work of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. Exploring such interdisciplinary connections may help bridge the gap between Islamic philosophy and modern cognitive sciences, enriching the discourse on intentionality beyond the boundaries of Western traditions.

Conclusion

With intentionality as a referring characteristic of our mental states, and with the above account of the problem of mental content and possibility of intentionality, as well as the relation between this concept and that of mental existence or knowledge in Islamic philosophy, we can find a way to formulate and answer its relevant problems in the context of ‘Allama Tabataba’i’s philosophy. In fact, mental existence as the way in which knowledge by acquisition is obtained in our minds has a comparative intentional character, essentially representing external existence. Accordingly, representation or revelation is essential to, and inextricable from, mental existence and epistemic forms. Given the peculiar way in which each piece of knowledge by acquisition is abstracted from its representum, the mental content of our knowledge by acquisition will be determined. In other words, the particular truth aspect in the reference of each piece of knowledge determines the content of the relevant concepts or propositions. On this picture, ‘Allama Tabataba’i’s theory is a version of a causal account, according to which the content of a mental state is explained in terms of external causes that engender those states.

However, on this theory, “intentionality” is a fundamental property that is irreducible to physical properties, based on the immateriality of “knowledge.” On this account, contents of concepts and propositions are determined in terms of how they are abstracted from their truth aspects and references.

In this critical review, we have examined ‘Allama Tabataba’i’s view of intentionality, which centers on the immaterial, representational nature of knowledge. His philosophical framework offers a profound metaphysical response to the classic problems of intentionality. However, when analyzed through the lens of contemporary philosophy of mind, significant challenges arise, particularly regarding empirical verification and the integration of his ideas with physicalist models. While the metaphysical premises of his theory may limit its engagement with cognitive neuroscience, the conceptual parallels with phenomenological traditions present fertile ground for future dialogue. By engaging with these critiques, scholars can better appreciate the potential and the limitations of Tabataba’i’s contributions to the ongoing discourse on mental content and intentionality.

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