There is widespread agreement today that the problem of intentionality—roughly, the problem of how mental states can have content or be "directed at an object"—constitutes one of the central and abiding difficulties in the philosophy of mind. What is less widely recognized is that ancient Greek philosophers had a good deal to say about the topic. In fact, if historical consensus is right, the concept only emerges in the Middle Ages among Arabic philosophers and from there is passed on to the Latin West. Tonight, I would like to challenge this thesis and convince you that some of the problems we are currently concerned with enjoy a much longer history and are woven thick into the fabric of ancient Greek philosophy.

I.

Before we begin, though, it will be helpful to clear up some terminological confusions that inevitably arise in this context. 'Intentionality', in the sense we shall be using it here, is a technical term, resurrected from medieval Latin by the German philosopher Franz Brentano at the end of the last century. Ordinary English has nothing quite like it: 'intend', 'intention', and 'intentional', for example, are false friends. Such words have historical connections with the Latin, of course, and even the traces of a conceptual connection as well. But their focus is entirely different. They are concerned primarily with matters of will and action, whereas 'intentionality' in our sense need not involve volition at all. Many of our mental states—such as
understanding the Pythagorean theorem or daydreaming—are intentional in the sense that they are about something, and so have content, independently of our intending to do anything or of our having intentions of any sort. The latter have content, too, of course—an intention, for example, is directed at the result we hope to accomplish—so that volitional states will be intentional in our sense of the word as well. But they are merely one species among many, without any special primacy of place. Volitional states are relevant only to the extent that they too possess content.

A second, and more esoteric, source of confusion derives from logic and the distinction between extensional and intensional contexts. The connections here are deeper. Many of the distinctive features of intentionality in our sense of the term have their analog in the peculiarities of intensional contexts, and there is a natural drive to try to explain one in terms of the other. But the two are nevertheless distinct, and there is great controversy over which is prior and even over the exact nature of their relationship.1 Suffice it to say that one need not take a stand on these issues in order to discuss intentionality in the sense we are interested in. Many of the historical figures we will consider did not take such a stand, nor could they have been expected to.

What is intentionality, then? Initially, we may characterize it as the “of-ness” or “about-ness” of mental states: that feature in virtue of which most, if not all, mental states can be said to be of or about something. If, for example, I have a thought, it is always a thought of something (in the present case, say, San Francisco); likewise, if I am angry, I am most certainly angry about something, even if I am unable to specify immediately what it is. The same can be said for a host of other mental states: beliefs, dreams, desires, memories, hopes, and fears, as well as a wide range of emotions. In each of these cases, it is essential

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1. See esp. the classic debate in Chisholm and Sellars 1958. For the priority of language, see the so-called “analogy” theorists, Sellars (concisely expressed in Chisholm and Sellars 1958) and Geach 1957. For the priority of the mental, see esp. Chisholm 1984 and Searle 1983, Chapter 7 (“Intensional Reports of Intentional States and Speech Acts”).