INTRODUCTION

In his book on Husserl, David Bell notes that:

Two ways of modeling the human mind predominated in the second half of the nineteenth century. On the one side stood the classical empiricist model of the mind as a largely passive, static, transparent medium of awareness on which experiences impress themselves. According to this model, perception, memory, imagination, judgement, association of ideas and the rest are just so many vicissitudes of mental life, so many things which, so to speak, befall us. Now a natural consequence of such a doctrine is the emphasizing of ‘contents’ of consciousness at the expense of the mental acts and activities of which they are the contents: clearly if one takes the mind to be largely passive, and if one takes consciousness itself to be simply a transparent awareness accompanying mental phenomena, then all interest must focus on those contents, if only because on this model there remains little or nothing else that can be talked about. The second model, on the other hand, associated particularly with Kant, assigns a dynamic, indeed a creative role to the human mind: through such activities as synthesis, interpretation, inference, judgement, even perception itself, the mind imposes its own order and meaning on what Kant called ‘the raw material of sensible impressions’. And inherent in this conception is a natural tendency towards idealism, which culminates in the Kantian claim that ‘the order and regularity of appearances, which we call nature we ourselves introduce’.

Brentano rejects both these accounts outright, developing in their place a theory of mental phenomena which, he hoped, would nevertheless combine all that was worth salvaging from either of them. Accordingly, for Brentano, mental phenomena are simply acts which have contents. We shall see shortly what is involved in the notion of ‘having a content’; for the moment we can note that all mental phenomena are, for Brentano, mental acts. Indeed, he uses the terms ‘mental phenomena’ and ‘mental act’ synonymously (Bell, 1990, p.7).

Since the object of Bell’s study is Husserl and the concepts that he introduced into modern philosophy his discussion of intentionality only serves as an introduction to the larger study; he does not go into detail in regard to the differences between the classical empiricist and intentional models of mind cited above.
In a similar vein, David Carr (1987) claims that the main problem for modern philosophy has been the attempt to settle the appearance/reality question and that the ‘way of ideas’ has been the standard means of doing this. Like Bell, Carr cites the classical empiricist model of mind as well as the Kantian compromise. Also like Bell, however, Carr is concerned primarily with elucidating Husserlian concepts rather than looking at the different models themselves.

There is no doubt that the intentionality thesis, initially introduced into modern philosophy by Brentano and taken up and developed more fully by Twardowski and Husserl, was instrumental in introducing a radical new conception of mind into philosophical discourse and Bell and Carr are correct to emphasise the epistemological importance of this. All epistemology is underpinned by ontology, however, which in this sense is antecedent to it. If intentionality had radical consequences for traditional empiricist epistemology it had equally radical consequences for the traditional ontology associated with it.
By ‘traditional ontology’ here I am referring to the ontology found in Descartes and the British Empiricists, Berkeley, Locke and Hume, the principal characteristic of which is the primacy of the subject category of being.

In the ontologies of these thinkers the object category is derived from, and dependent upon the category of subject, which is considered primary on both an epistemological and ontological level. This arose from the conception of the subject as immaterial substance of which ideas, conceived as both mental acts and mental objects, are simply different aspects or moments. Such a conception underlies the familiar metaphor of the mind as a closed, interior realm for which all reality is representational.

Difference, understood in the strong sense of being other than, or external to the subject, appears incomprehensible in the context of these ontologies. As a consequence external reality, experienced on the phenomenological level as precisely what is other than the subject, becomes inexplicable. The fact that the so-called ‘problem of the external world’ was,
for many decades, considered one of the most intransigent in philosophy is eloquent testimony to this.

The goal of this dissertation is to show how the ontology of ideas arose in the philosophy of Descartes and the extent to which it influenced the writings of the empiricists, Berkeley, Locke and Hume; to locate the point at which the ‘external reality’ problem emerges; and to subsequently show how the intentionality thesis served, by allowing for the development of an independent object category, to change a philosophical paradigm that held sway for many hundreds of years.

In the first chapter I look at the characterization of subject and object in Descartes and the British Empiricists. My argument is that there is a structural anomaly in Cartesianism arising from the substance/property model of mind on which the ontology of ideas is premised. This anomaly, which consists of ideas being regarded as either mental objects or mental occurrences, but in either case as moments or modifications of the one entity, gives rise to the notion of the idea as a subjective object. As a consequence of this the ontology is unable to offer an independent object category with the
result that entity independence or difference cannot be accounted for, as the
problem of the external world shows. The *subjective* object, an object
dependent on the subject category, is the only object the ontology of ideas
can account for.

This notion of the idea as an object of thought became a paradigm in
philosophical discourse from the time of Descartes until the early twentieth
century, when it was shaken by the desire of thinkers such as Frege, Russell,
Moore and Sartre to establish an object-based ontology.

In the second chapter I demonstrate how the problem of the external
world, which arose in Descartes’ philosophy as a direct consequence of the
structural anomaly mentioned above, was replicated in the philosophies of
Locke, Berkeley and Hume as a consequence of their acceptance of the
ontology of ideas and the notion of subjective object to which it gave rise. I
also discuss their various, although ultimately unsuccessful, attempts to
resolve the problem.

Hume, of course, abandoned the notion of thinking or mental
substance and with it the substance/property model of mind. There is,
therefore, no question so far as Hume is concerned of the object being regarded as the property of a substance as is the case with Berkeley and Locke who both retained thinking substance as the entity to which ideas could be attributed.

Nonetheless, Hume’s conception of the object is as much a conception of a subjective object as is that of Berkeley and Locke since all three thinkers retain the notion of the idea as the only object of awareness. The difference is that whereas the idea in Descartes, Berkeley and Locke is regarded as a property of the mind, in Hume it is viewed as a constituent of the perceptual object which is regarded as a complex of ideas.

At the end of the day, however, Hume’s model exhibits the same anomalous structure outlined above in respect of Descartes. In both cases what is involved is reference to one entity of which the idea is a part, either as a property of a substance as in Descartes’ case, or as an element in a complex, as in Hume’s.

Chapter Three looks at the problem of the external world in the writings of Frege, Moore, Russell and Sartre and argues that while these thinkers
realized that a resolution of the problem lay in an alternative account of the
object, their acceptance of particular aspects of the ontology of ideas
prevented the development of such an account.

In Chapter Four I discuss the concept of intentionality as introduced
into modern philosophy by Brentano. This concept was ground-breaking in
two important respects. On the one hand, by claiming that consciousness
was relational it allowed for an account of the mental in which awareness
could be construed as a relation between two entities. And, on the other, it
paved the way, in principle, for a resolution of the external reality problem by
claiming that all consciousness or awareness is of something other than
consciousness itself. This implied that any object present to consciousness
could be described, thus opening the way to an account of the object which
included entities other than the mental. Once this avenue of thought was
opened up the way was clear for the development of an alternative to the
ontology of ideas.

I argue that although Brentano was unsuccessful in developing an
independent object category because of the presence in his thought of
metaphysical presuppositions relating to the traditional paradigm, the full promise of the concept was realized in the writings of Twardowski, who developed the distinction between the intentional object and the 'presented object', and Husserl whose account of transcendent perception was able to adequately account for those elements in our perceptual experience of external objects left unaccounted for in the traditional paradigm.

I mentioned above that the ideas ontology gave rise to a metaphor of the mind as a closed realm accessible only to the subject. This view of the mind is often referred to in the literature as the 'contents' theory of mind where 'contents' refers to ideas in so far as they appear to a knowing subject. In so far as ideas are 'contents' they can be entities that either stand alone or entities that are intermediate between the mind and a reality external to it.

Either way, the phrase 'contents theory' serves to designate an essentially epistemological doctrine. In what follows I use the phrase 'ideas ontology' to designate the ontology which underlies this doctrine. Where I use the word 'contents' it should be understood in the sense outlined above.