

Brentano and His Notion of Intentionality

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The purpose of discussing Brentano's philosophy here is to provide a necessary background for a fuller understanding of Meinong. There are two reasons why such a discussion is valuable. First, it is well known that Brentano, being the teacher of Meinong, exerted great influence on the philosophical thought of Meinong.¹ Thus, there will be issues that were only partially developed by Brentano that were later fully developed by Meinong. The second reason that a look at Brentano's theory of intentionality is valuable is that he serves as an important link between scholasticism and modernity with respect to the notion of intentionality. Brentano's notion of intentionality is derived from scholastic philosophy, as he himself claims, and plays a significant role in modern philosophy, especially the philosophy of Husserl, Meinong, and contemporary philosophy of mind.

To give a comprehensive presentation of Brentano's philosophy is not only an impossible task, given space and time constraints, but would be mostly irrelevant for our purposes. Instead, the focus of my analysis in this chapter will be on Brentano's views on mental phenomena, his theory of intentionality, and his treatment of non-existent objects.

A. Mental phenomena

¹ I am not interested in producing historical evidence for the validity of such an influence; I am interested in the issues and problems themselves.

Brentano, in his discussion of mental phenomena², presents a set of criteria for distinguishing between mental and physical phenomena that are still used in contemporary philosophy of mind. Brentano's objective is to define or to provide the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a mental phenomenon.

The first definition relies solely on examples of particular cases. This method of defining things is quite common. For instance, if I want to define what a color is, I could enumerate specific colors, e.g. blue, yellow, orange, etc. While this is not a formal definition, it helps in understanding what a color is. Accordingly, Brentano claims that "every presentation of sensation or imagination offers an example of the mental phenomenon."³ Brentano goes on to explain that what he means by a presentation (*vorstellung*) is not that which is presented, i.e. the content or object, but the act, i.e. seeing a color, hearing a sound, etc. This distinction between the mental act and the mental content or object is parallel to Suárez's distinction between the formal concept and the objective concept, respectively.⁴ Therefore, according to Brentano, hearing a sound, seeing a color, sensing something warm are examples of mental phenomena. Brentano also includes "every judgment, every recollection, every expectation, every inference, every conviction, or opinion, every doubt, ... every emotion, joy, sorrow, fear,

² Franz Brentano, "The Distinction Between Mental and Physical Phenomena" (hereafter "DMP") translated by D.B. Terrell, Realism and the Background of Phenomenology, edited by Roderick Chisholm (Illinois: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1960) 39-61.

³ Brentano, "DMP" 41.

⁴ Cf. *supra*, 42-44.

hope, pride, despair, contempt, etc.”⁵

Brentano’s second definition states that all mental phenomena are either presentations or are in some way based on a presentation. According to Brentano, “presentations form the bases for the other mental phenomena.”⁶ Brentano notes that this view has been challenged and mentions the criticism of J.B. Meyer. Meyer claims that in lower animals there may be mental phenomena, such as feelings and desires, and no presentations. The disagreement between Meyer and Brentano is really a disagreement about the definition of a presentation. Brentano says:

Meyer understands the concept of presentation more narrowly than we have understood it. ‘Presentation,’ he [Meyer] says, ‘first enters in when the sensed change in one’s own state can be understood as the result of an outer stimulus, even if this expresses itself, at first, only in the unconscious looking or feeling around for an external object which results from it’⁷

For Brentano, presentation is the most rudimentary of all mental phenomena. It is the basic appearing in or presenting to consciousness. It is, he claims, synonymous with “to appear.” Meyer agrees with Brentano that there are such basic mental phenomena that all other mental phenomena presuppose but gives them the name of “feelings.” In the end, Brentano admits, “if Meyer’s viewpoint is translated into our language, the contradiction disappears of its own accord.”⁸

A second criticism of the primordial nature of presentations is that there are some

⁵ Brentano, “DMP” 41.

⁶ Brentano, “DMP” 42.

⁷ Brentano, “DMP” 42.

kinds of sensual feelings of pleasure and displeasure that do not presuppose a presentation (even understood as a basic “appearing to”) on which they are based. Brentano presents this criticism in two parts. First, there are sensual feelings that are related to one’s physical body and do not presuppose a basic presentation. For example, in the case of a cut or burn one may experience pain without experiencing a basic presentation, e.g. the sensation of touch or heat. Thus, one may argue that this feeling of pain, which has no presentation and is not itself a presentation, is basic and serves as a counter-example to the claim that all mental sensation entails a presentation or “appearing to” of some sort. Second, there are sensual feelings, which are not related to one’s physical body and do not presuppose a basic presentation. For instance, in hearing a beautiful melody one may experience pleasure. Again, one may argue that this feeling of pleasure is a distinct sensual quality (as in the cases above where pain is distinct from touch or heat) and that it does not presuppose any presentation. Therefore, this feeling of pleasure also serves as a counter-example to the claim that all mental phenomena entail a presentation.

Brentano has two replies to these criticisms. The first is to note that all pain or pleasure related to one’s physical body is localizable in some spatial dimension, as for example in my right foot or in my lower back. This definite spatial location is a presentation that is presupposed by every mental phenomenon of pain or pleasure of this sort. Brentano’s second reply claims that the belief that certain sensations such as pain or pleasure occur without a prior presentation of some sort (so that they serve as

⁸ Brentano, “DMP” 44.

an exception to the general rule that all mental phenomena presuppose a presentation) is based on an illusion. Brentano argues that several sensory phenomena may appear together, and, in such cases, they should be considered as one, insofar as one presentation may serve as a base for several mental phenomena. In the case of feelings, they should be considered as part of a greater sensation that includes sensations of other classes. For instance, in the case of heat, one may argue that as the excitation increases the sensation of heat increases up to a certain point, and then the sensation of pain becomes more significant and that of heat less. If the excitation were to continue getting stronger, then there would come a time when the sensation of heat would disappear and only the feeling of pain would remain. Brentano says, "if the first kind of quality [heat] disappeared entirely, then we would believe that we possessed nothing besides a feeling, without any presentation on which it is based."⁹ This is the illusion that Brentano is referring to.

Another factor that Brentano claims leads to the illusion that there are mental phenomena that are not based on any prior presentation is caused by the equivocal use of the terms "pain" and "pleasure." Brentano claims that this equivocal use occurs when we refer to the physical phenomenon as "painful" or "pleasant." The confusion, according to Brentano, is caused by the lack of distinction between the physical phenomenon and the feeling that accompanies it. Only a feeling or sensation can properly be called painful or pleasant. He says: "We do not say that this or that phenomenon in the foot is experienced with pain so much as we say that pain is

experienced in the foot.”¹⁰ Brentano maintains that to say “that pain is experienced in the foot” is to use “pain” in an equivocal way. How is it that this problem of equivocation can cause the illusion that there is a mental phenomenon without a presentation? Brentano claims that referring to the cause of the feeling and the feeling itself by the same name leads one to conflate the two, so that it would appear that the feeling (i.e. pain) is primordial and does not presupposes a presentation. He says: “A further basis for the illusion is that the quality on which the feeling ensues, and the feeling itself do not bear two distinct names.”¹¹ If Brentano is right, then all mental phenomena are either presentations or are based on a presentation.

The third definition is a negative definition. Brentano notes that all physical phenomena are extended things and have some definite spatial location. On the other hand, all mental phenomena, such as willing and desiring, manifest neither extension nor any definite spatial location. Therefore, a mental phenomenon is a non-extended thing with no spatial location.

Brentano notes that for various reasons this definition will not do. First, many psychologists have contested the claim that all physical phenomena are extended and spatially localizable. For instance, the phenomena of the sense of smell and sounds, some have claimed, appear free of extension and of any definite spatial location. Moreover, the fact that the phenomena of vision and touch may appear in a definite spatial location may be due to other reasons than that they are in fact in a definite

⁹ Brentano, “DMP” 46.

¹⁰ Brentano, “DMP” 46.

spatial location. Brentano says:

The reason for this [that the phenomena of vision and touch appear in a definite spatial location], it is said, is the fact that on the basis of prior experience we connect with them our gradually developed presentation of *space*; originally without definite spatial location, they are later localized by us. If this should really be the only way in which physical phenomena attain definite spatial location, then we would plainly no longer distinguish the two realms by reference to this property.¹²

Besides the contention that there are physical phenomena that lack definite spatial location, there is also the contention that there are mental phenomena that have definite spatial location or even that are extended. In support of such opposition, Brentano mentions Aristotle, noting that Aristotle maintains that, “sense perception is the act of a physical organ.”¹³ Unfortunately, Brentano says nothing further in support of this alleged position of Aristotle. I believe Brentano is partially correct in his Aristotelian interpretation, since for Aristotle all affections of the soul are a complex of body and soul (with the possible exception of thinking). Aristotle says: “If we consider the majority of them [affections of the soul], there seems to be no case in which the soul can act or be acted upon without involving the body; e.g. anger, courage, appetite and sensation generally. Thinking seems the most probable exception.”¹⁴ However, I do not believe that from this it follows that there are mental phenomena that are extended or have a definite location in space. Instead, all that follows is that there cannot be any

¹¹ Brentano, “DMP” 46.

¹² Brentano, “DMP” 48.

¹³ Brentano, “DMP” 49.

¹⁴ Aristotle, “De Anima,” BK. I: Ch. 1 403a (5), The Basic Works of Aristotle, edited by Richard McKeon (

mental phenomena without the body.

A fourth definition of mental phenomena Brentano mentions is that they are perceived only in inner consciousness. From this definition three other important characteristics can be derived. First, mental phenomena have the properties of immediacy, infallibility and self-evidence. Second, inner perception is real and authentic perception. Outer perception, Brentano claims, “can in no way be demonstrated to be true and real, even by means by indirect reasoning.... Strictly speaking, so-called outer perception is thus not perception; and mental phenomena can accordingly be designated as the only ones of which perception in the strict sense of the word is possible.”¹⁵ It is evident that Brentano is working under the influence of a Cartesian theory of knowledge, and it is important to keep this in mind when we compare and contrast Meinong and Suárez. Moreover, it is important for our understanding of his notion of intentionality. Finally, from the fact that mental phenomena are introspectively perceivable we can derive the further characteristic that no mental phenomena can be perceived by more than one individual. Hence they are necessarily private.

A fifth characteristic of mental phenomena can be derived from the fact that they are the only phenomena of which we can have an authentic perception. Since they are the only things that are truly and really perceived, they are the only things of which we can predicate true and actual existence. Brentano considers Bain’s claim that not only are

New York: Random House 1941) 537-538.

mental phenomena the only things to which we can attribute actual existence, but, moreover, that to attribute such existence to physical phenomena is self-contradictory. Brentano's description of Bain's argument is a reiteration in summary form of Berkeley's argument for the non-existence of matter. It claims that since we cannot perceive an unperceived thing, then nothing exists that is not perceived or independent of being perceived. Bain's conclusion, however, does not follow, since the fact that we cannot perceive an unperceived thing does not mean that there are no such things. Brentano notes that what follows from Bain's argument is simply "that a person can only think of trees perceived by him, but not that he could only think of trees *as perceived by him*."¹⁶ While Brentano rejects Bain's argument it should be noted that such an argument could only have been taken seriously in a post-Cartesian era, and that Brentano does take it seriously. He says: "It is not true, then, that the hypothesis that a physical phenomenon like those which exist intentionally in us exist outside of the mind in actuality includes a contradiction. It is only true that, when we compare one with the other, conflicts are revealed, which show clearly that there is no actual existence corresponding to the intentional existence in this case."¹⁷

A sixth characteristic of mental phenomena, according to Brentano, is that more than one can never occur to the same subject of experience simultaneously. This sort of unity of consciousness has been interpreted in different ways. Brentano notes that a correct

¹⁵ Brentano, "DMP" 53.

¹⁶ Brentano, "DMP" 54-55.

¹⁷ Brentano, "DMP" 55.

interpretation requires that one not conflate simplicity with unity. If it were claimed that mental phenomena are always composed of a simple physical phenomenon, then this would be incorrect. Moreover, it should be noted that physical phenomena could not vary simultaneously unless the sensations also varied simultaneously. According to Brentano, therefore, the only way we can understand the unity of a consciousness of a multiplicity of mental phenomena is through its appearing to someone as a unity, as a “bundle of perceptions, or as hanging-together in an internal unity.” Brentano notes that when we perceive simultaneously different qualities, we have no difficulty in ascribing these qualities to different objects. On the other hand, when we experience different sensations, we cannot but take these to be partial acts of a unified phenomenon. Brentano says:

We are obliged to take the diverse set of corresponding acts of sensation, seeing, hearing, sensing heat, and smelling, and with them the willing and feeling and considering going on at the same time, and the inner perception by which we are aware of all of them as well, to be partial phenomena of a unified phenomenon which includes them, and to take them to be a single, unified thing.¹⁸

Finally, Brentano claims that all mental phenomena have the characteristic of having an intentional inexistent object. This property of mental phenomena is significant, since Brentano believes it provides a positive definition of such phenomena, and opens the door to what Meinong will develop later into his Theory of Objects. Moreover, it is this definition of mental phenomena by Brentano that has been most emphasized. I will,

¹⁸ Brentano, “DMP” 58.

therefore, devote more attention in explaining this property.

B. Intentionality

Brentano says:

Every mental phenomenon is characterized by what the scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (and also mental) inexistence of an object, and what we would call, although in not entirely unambiguous terms, the reference to a content, a direction upon an object (by which we are not to understand a reality in this case), or an immanent objectivity. Each one includes something as object within itself, although not always in the same way. In presentation something is presented, in judgment something is affirmed or denied, in love [something is] loved, in hate [something] hated, in desire [something] desired, etc.¹⁹

Therefore, according to Brentano, all mental phenomena are always directed towards an intentional in-existent object. The object is not something that exists in reality but rather is something that is immanent in consciousness. This property is something that all mental phenomena share and cannot pertain to any physical phenomena. Therefore, it serves as an essential property that distinguishes the mental from the physical. Already, we can distinguish Brentano's understanding of the objective being of the intentional object from Suárez's. Suárez, however, refers to Brentano's "intentional object" as the "objective concept."²⁰

Brentano discusses one possible exception brought forward by Hamilton. Hamilton suggest that, while it is true that in the case of thinking, judging and desiring there is always an intentional non-existent object, since we cannot think without thinking of

¹⁹ Brentano, "DMP" 50.

²⁰ Cf. *supra*, 42-44.

something or affirm and deny without affirming and denying something or desire without desiring something, the same is not true of feelings. Hamilton suggests that one could feel sorrow without feeling sorrow about something or pleasure without feeling pleasure about something. Brentano argues against this position by first analyzing language and noting that when we speak of grief, sorrow, or joy, we do so always with respect to some thing. Second, Brentano notes that since all mental phenomena are based on presentations, it would be impossible that one could have a feeling that lacks an object of presentation. Third, Brentano notes that the intentional object does not have to be an extra-mental object, instead it may be a mental phenomenon itself. For instance, the object of our feeling of pleasure may be the hearing of music. Since this is a possibility, it may be the case that the intentional object may refer to oneself or one's own inner consciousness and thus cause an appearance of a feeling with no object. Brentano says: "Indeed, one might not be mistaken in saying that it (the feeling) even refers to itself in a certain way and, therefore, that what Hamilton asserts, namely, that the feeling is 'fused into one' with its object, *does* occur more or less... Nevertheless, in them there is still a mental inexistence, a subject-object, to speak Hamilton's language."²¹

There are several important things that emerge from Brentano's claim that the presence of an intentional object is a sufficient and necessary mark of mental phenomena. First, it serves as fertile soil for Meinong's cultivation of his theory of

²¹ Brentano, "DMP" 52.

objects, and it motivates Meinong's belief that a new discipline is required for the treatment of these objects. Meinong says:

No one fails to recognize that psychological events so very commonly have this distinctive 'character of being directed to something' as to suggest very strongly (at least) that we should take it to be a characteristic aspect of the psychological as opposed to the non-psychological.... The intent of the problem raised here is to call attention to just such an area [an area untouched by any science], which is sometimes overlooked, sometimes not sufficiently appreciated in its distinctive character. The question concerns the proper place for the scientific investigation of the Object (*Gegenstand*).²²

Specifically, it creates, as Meinong sees it, the necessity of developing some theory that will discuss and treat intentional objects that have no existence in extra-mental reality.

He says:

It may sound strange to hear that metaphysics is not universal enough for a science of Objects, and hence cannot take on the task just formulated. For the intentions of metaphysics have been universal. Without doubt, metaphysics has to do with everything that exists. However, the totality of what exists, including what has existed and will exist, is infinitely small in comparison with the totality of the Objects of knowledge.²³

Thus, Brentano's view that mental phenomena have the characteristic of referring or being directed toward an object introduces, according to Meinong, philosophical material, namely the object as such, that requires investigation even though there is no discipline to carry out such an investigation.

The second important issue that emerges and creates much philosophical

²² Alexius Meinong, "The Theory of Objects," trans. by Issac Levi, D.B. Terrel, and Roderick Chisholm, *Realism and the Background to Phenomenology*, edited by Roderick Chisholm (Illinois: The Free Press Glencoe, 1960) 77-78.

controversy is the ontological status of the mental objects to which the mental intentions are directed. Brentano refers to (1) the “intentional inexistence of an object” and (2) “reference to a content.” The first is derived from the scholastics. The second is his description. The first question that arises is whether Brentano’s understanding of the “intentional inexistence of an object” is the same as that of the scholastics. The second question is whether the “intentional inexistence of an object” and “reference to an object” refer to the same thing.²⁴ At the heart of these questions lies the question of the relationships between the “intentional in-existent object” (Suárez’s notion of the objective concept or *esse cognitum*) and the object in extra-mental reality. These relationships and the questions surrounding Brentano’s notion of intentionality will be addressed further in Chapter VIII.²⁵

C. Non-existent objects

Brentano explicitly discusses the metaphysical problem concerning beings of reason or nonexistent objects, i.e. the reference to nonexistent objects, in “Genuine and Fictitious Objects.”²⁶ Many of the notions Meinong employs, even his argument from

²³ Meinong, “TO” 79.

²⁴ See Spiegelberg, Herbert, “Intention and Intentionality in the Scholastics, Brentano and Husserl,” The Philosophy of Brentano, edited by Linda L. McAlister (Atlantic Highlands: Humantes Press, 1976) 108-27. See also: Marras, Ausonio, “Scholastic Roots of Brentano’s Conception of Intentionality,” The Philosophy of Brentano, edited by Linda L. McAlister (Atlantic Highlands: Humantes Press, 1976) 128-139.

²⁵ I have made a similar reservation when I introduced “The Mentalistic Question” (cf. *supra*, 45-46) and Suárez’s notion of *esse cognitum* (i.e. EC1 and EC2) (cf. *supra*, 114). See also Meinong’s notion of the object of representation (cf. *infra*, 229-230). I believe that all three concerns are related.

²⁶ Franz Brentano, “Genuine and Fictitious Objects,” translated by D.B. Terrell, Realism and the Background of Phenomenology, edited by Roderick Chisholm (Illinois: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1960.) 71-75.

analogy, are already present in Brentano. Moreover, we shall see how Brentano's position is contrary to Meinong's and closer to Russell's. Brentano says, "In many cases the things to which we refer do not exist. But we are accustomed to saying that they then have being as objects. This is a loose use of the word, 'to be.'"²⁷ Brentano claims that intentionality and its necessarily always referring to an object has created talk about an object being in a subject. Moreover, Brentano claims that since referring to an object may manifest itself as a judgment, there has been talk about something more than just the object being in the subject, namely, a fact. Brentano calls this a *content*,²⁸ so that there is, besides an object, a content. For example, "there are no centaurs" is a content and the object is a centaur. If one were to claim that the content or the judgment has being in the subject, Brentano would argue that one is not using "being" in the same sense as that in which it is used when it is predicated of real beings. He says:

If I make the judgment, "A centaur does not exist," then it is said that the object is a centaur, but that the content of the judgment is that a centaur does not exist, or the non-existence of a centaur. If it is said that this content has its being in the active subject, then once again²⁹ the word "to be" is being used in a loose and improper sense.³⁰

Brentano, therefore, argues that nonexistent objects or *contents*, such as judgments,

²⁷ Brentano, "Genuine and Fictitious Objects" 71.

²⁸ Findlay's claim that, "Brentano makes no distinction between the content of a mental state and its object. Both words mean for him the 'something' which has intentional inexistence in the mental state to which the state is directed" represents a grave misunderstanding of Brentano on his part.

²⁹ Brentano is here referring to his similar analysis of non-existent objects as opposed to contents (or objectives). Brentano uses content and objective interchangeably.

³⁰ Brentano, "Genuine and Fictitious Objects" 71-72.

which are also called *objectives*,³¹ have no being whatsoever. Our ascribing being to these mental things may be convenient, especially in logic, but strictly speaking this is incorrect and a misuse of the notion of being. For Brentano, only real beings can be correctly said “to be.” Moreover, only real beings can be an object of mental reference. He says, “And so it holds true generally that nothing other than things, which fall entirely within the same concept of real entity, can provide an object for mental reference.”³² Nevertheless, we must remember that the problem of nonexistent objects arises because these objects are required for understanding in all disciplines. Thus, for instance, negations, e.g. ‘there are no roses,’ runs into the paradox that there are objects of which it the case that there are no such objects. Brentano would say that the correct way of saying, “there are no roses” is to say “there is nothing that exists for which the word ‘rose’ is a name.” He admits that, in our everyday use of language, we do not talk in a strictly proper fashion. For instance, he himself uses the loose manner of speech. He says: “Strictly speaking, therefore, we do not express ourselves quite correctly if we deny that the content of a judgment exists. We ought rather to say we deny that anything exists for which the word ‘content’ is a name.”³³

Finally, Brentano believes that the analogy that is sometimes made between objects and contents (or objectives) has no justification. The reasoning behind the analogy, according to Brentano, is that sometimes a content, such as the existence of a centaur,

³¹ Brentano and Meinong both mean the same thing by the word “objective.”

³² Brentano, “Genuine and Fictitious Objects” 74.

may become an object included in another content. For instance, the content "a centaur exists" may be an object within the content "it is true that a centaur exists." However, neither the object, "centaur," nor the content, "a centaur exists," can be a true object of a mental reference. Instead, Brentano maintains, only real objects can be objects of a mental reference. He says,

it is down right impossible [to have objects that are not real as objects of mental reference], for there cannot be anything at all other than real objects, and the same homogeneous concept of the real, as the most general concept of all, comprehends everything which is truly an object.³⁴

Brentano's views on mental phenomena, his notion of intentionality, and his treatment of fictitious objects provide a background and framework from which we will be better able to understand Meinong.

³³ Brentano, "Genuine and Fictitious Objects" 74.

³⁴ Brentano, "Genuine and Fictitious Objects" 75.