

From Psychology to Phenomenology

Franz Brentano's *Psychology*
from an Empirical Standpoint
and Contemporary Philosophy
of Mind

Biagio G. Tassone

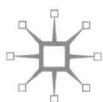


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*To the loving memory of my father,
Raffaele Tassone (1936–2011)*

Meditation on the writings of Brentano is one of our most important intellectual obligations.

– Xavier Zubiri
El Porvenir de la Filosofía
“Prologue”, 1936

Acknowledgments

I first read Brentano's *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt* in the early 1990s as an undergraduate at York University in Toronto, Canada. In researching term papers and conducting background reading for the philosophy courses of David Jopling and Mildred Bakan, I came across the English translation of the *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*. The PES left a lasting impression on me. Nonetheless it wasn't until my graduate studies that I began to devote serious attention to Brentano's work. The seeds of the current work can to a large extent be traced back to my formal years of study at the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium. Reading and thinking about Brentano's theory of judgment while preparing my licentiate thesis to complete my M.A. in philosophy during 1999–2001 led me to believe that the philosophical contributions that Brentano's work has to offer have still not been fully appreciated. However after I completed my licentiate thesis I moved on to other topics. It was only in the process of conducting research for my Ph.D. dissertation (this time as a doctoral candidate in Ireland) that I began to think about the usefulness of a compendium or reader's companion to Brentano's *Psychology* as being a worthwhile undertaking. As the years went by and nothing like the above appeared I decided to take the initiative and bring the above commentary on Brentano's *Psychology* into existence. The current study began as an attempt to prepare the above but soon grew into this somewhat different work. Further thanks and gratitude for helping this project take on its final shape are due to the following people. First I'd like to thank Dr. Alexander Rosenthal of the Johns Hopkins University for providing helpful comments and feedback about the first chapter. James D. Nicholson, currently with the Program in Neuroscience at the University of Maryland, Baltimore campus, deserves thanks both for his editorial advice and for the helpful information about the state of contemporary neuroscience that he passed on to me in emails and private conversations. Warm thanks also go out to Dr. Robin Rollinger at the University of Salzburg for his stimulating e-mail exchanges about Brentano's unpublished manuscripts. Select sections of Chapter 8 have appeared already in the *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*. I thank Dr. Ullrich M. Hasse for kindly

granting me permission to reuse that material here. Finally, and by no means lastly, a very special thanks and immense gratitude must be expressed to my wife Isabel Cranz. Her proofreading of sections of the manuscript and more importantly her patience and steadfast support more than anything helped this project reach completion.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations will be used throughout for reference to the most frequently cited of Brentano's published writings. See the bibliography below for publication details.

1 German editions of Brentano's writings

AN	<i>Die Abkehr vom Nichtrealen</i>
AW	<i>Aristoteles und seine Weltanschauung</i>
EL 80	<i>Logik-Kolleg</i> – unpublished lecture notes
GAE	<i>Grundlegung und Aufbau der Ethik</i>
KL	<i>Kategorienlehre</i>
MBS	<i>Von der Mannigfachen Bedeutung des Seinden nach Aristoteles</i>
MLW	<i>Meine letzten Wünsche für Österreich</i>
PdA	<i>Die Psychologie des Aristoteles: insbesondere seine Lehre von nous poietikos</i>
PES-G	<i>Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt</i>
PP	<i>Die vier Phasen der Philosophie und ihr augenblicklicher Stand</i>
VDG	<i>Vom Dasein Gottes</i>
VUSE	<i>Vom Ursprung sittlicher Erkenntnis</i>
ZP	<i>Über die Zukunft der Philosophie</i>

2 English translations

AWV	<i>Aristotle and His Worldview</i>
DP	<i>Descriptive Psychology</i>
FCE	<i>The Foundation and Construction of Ethics</i>
OEG	<i>On the Existence of God, Lectures given at the Universities of Würzburg and Vienna 1868–1891</i>
ORW	<i>Origin of the Knowledge of Right and Wrong</i>
OSS	<i>On the Several Senses of Being in Aristotle</i>
PA	<i>The Psychology of Aristotle</i>
PES	<i>Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint</i>
SNC	<i>Sensory and Noetic Consciousness</i>
TE	<i>The True and the Evident</i>

3 Other texts

- CCB *The Cambridge Companion to Brentano*
SB *The School of Franz Brentano*
TPB *The Philosophy of Brentano*

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Introduction

The following book presents an outline and critical reading of Franz Brentano's philosophy of mind focusing closely on the system outlined in his *magnum opus Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*.¹ In this 1874 text Brentano articulates a teleological and neo-Aristotelian framework for understanding the mental as representational. Brentano's earlier development of Aristotelian metaphysics and ontology in an empirical direction set the stage for the articulation of his philosophical psychology and new theory of the mental. Nonetheless Brentano's philosophical psychology still forms one of the overlooked alternatives in contemporary philosophy of mind. This is not to deny that the philosophical system of the PES has not had a strong, albeit indirect, influence on subsequent philosophy of mind. Many isolated aspects of Brentano's thought have been critically examined and commented on in the existing literature, yet the actual position put forth in the PES is almost never examined in itself as a whole and within its historical context.²

No doubt part of the reason for the neglect of Brentano's position is that the intellectual context in philosophy of mind has changed since the PES was published. Consequently, and as a result, the system developed in the PES has become difficult to understand and appreciate. Another serious problem is that the project of descriptive psychology introduced in the PES was later appropriated by thinkers whose own projects and aims were both opposed and frequently alien to the intellectual outlook and goals of Brentano's work. The neglect of Brentano's theoretical approach and writings however has led to the strange situation that still currently holds in contemporary philosophy of mind. Namely, although many thinkers frequently cite Brentano's *Psychology* or often mention its doctrines, little insight or agreement about what

Brentano intended to accomplish in his best-known work can be found. The PES therefore presents the contemporary reader with many problems and difficulties. Yet the project begun by Brentano deserves to be re-evaluated if for no other reason than in order to explore and develop a better philosophical understanding of the mind. Brentano's system outlined in the PES offers the clues for a coherent way of understanding the mind and cognition and therefore escaping current dead ends in philosophy of mind.

1.1 Brentano's influence on subsequent thinkers

The strong and consistent influence that Brentano's writings (especially the PES) have had on subsequent thinkers should of itself justify continued interest in his work. If pressed to single out only one work from the past 150 years deserving the title "most influential work on subsequent philosophy of mind". Brentano's PES would certainly be a leading candidate. The above claim may sound extravagant to some, or perhaps somewhat exaggerated, but it is a claim that can be defended.

Although Brentano's influence on German phenomenology (and especially the work of Husserl)³ is already quite well known, his thought also influenced other important intellectual developments and movements. For example, a casual overview of the influence of Brentano's thought will demonstrate that it provided a reference point for many subsequent approaches in psychology and philosophy of mind. Amongst these can be cited the logical and epistemological studies of the "proto-analytic" approach to philosophy pioneered by the Vienna Circle. Simultaneously Brentano's writings and thought also had a noticeable influence on the early philosophical thought of Martin Heidegger. Other important movements that can be mentioned and that were either directly or indirectly influenced by Brentano include: philosophical semantics, developments in formal logic and linguistics, the development of modern logic, object theory, ontology (both formal and material) and gestalt psychology. Psychoanalysis can also be added to the above list, as no less important a figure than Sigmund Freud was also a student of Brentano's in Vienna.⁴

What makes a focus on Brentano's thought all the more necessary, however, is the fact that those thinkers who were most profoundly influenced by his work frequently took many aspects of his system and either distorted or ignored the underlying context against which it was originally articulated.⁵ These borrowings and buildings on Brentano's insights eventually developed into some of the still influential models

of the mind and cognition actively discussed today. While many of these extant philosophical theories and models of the mind are in many cases deserving of their influence (and also of the scholarly attention they have received), there is still value in examining their underlying foundations and original source of influence. Focusing attention on Brentano's immanent or phenomenological realism is therefore of great importance in order to arrive at a better understanding of the context and content of many theories in modern philosophy of mind.

1.2 The intrinsic value of Brentano's thought

The system that Brentano outlines in his *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* was developed during a period when quantitative and physicalist/ materialist approaches in philosophy of mind were gaining currency. Largely for this reason Brentano's work was often relegated to the fringes of what was, in his own day, the new introspectionist and experimental paradigm in psychology and philosophy of mind. The way that Brentano's work was marginalized merits our attention and compounds our previous claim that his neglect is largely unwarranted.

Brentano's name is frequently and indelibly linked (mostly in the role of antagonistic foil) to that of Wilhelm Wundt. According to many mainstream historians of psychology, Wundt is considered the founder of "scientific" psychology and Brentano a philosopher who discussed psychological matters such as mental acts. There are certainly real and significant differences between the psychologies and philosophical systems of Brentano and Wundt. Notwithstanding the philosophical differences between the two, as early proponents of scientific psychology, the accounts of their respective projects in the secondary literature tend to simultaneously simplify and exaggerate the diversity of their approaches in philosophy of mind.⁶ In the case of Wundt, it is his philosophical and systematic interdisciplinary breadth that is downplayed, while, in the case of Brentano, the adherence of his method to experimentation and empirical facts as a source of psychological knowledge often fails to be taken into account. Subsequently, a misleading account of the actual use of logic and argumentation in Brentano's system and of the use of experiment in Wundt's work has become a standard narrative.

In the early twentieth century, for example, Wundt's reputation was solidified as "the father of experimental psychology" mostly by his students, such as E. B. Titchener, who were attempting to establish the respectability of the new laboratory psychology and distance

it from the philosophy departments. Therefore, given this posthumous reputation, the common assessment of Wundt's actual contributions to experimental psychology were shaped as much by his influential students and followers (these also include Titchener's own student, the most important historian of psychology in the English language world for many years: Edwin G. Boring), than by his actual writings.⁷ The above, together with Wundt's prolific output and untiring sponsorship, of Ph.D. students to promote his ideas, can be viewed as largely responsible for the advancement of the neo-Wundtian introspectionist approach and the downplaying of Brentano's alternative investigation of conscious acts in the early history of psychology.

A closer look at the two men reveals some interesting similarities, however. Wundt himself was far from being a positivist or reductionist, going so far in his writings as to claim that a non-reductionist understanding of consciousness and human mental life is defensible (see Wundt, [1874], 1909, 2).⁸ Therefore the Wundtians, somewhat ironically given Wundt's affinity to philosophical approaches to studying the mind and the outright philosophical content of many of his writings, were largely responsible for liberating psychology from the professors of philosophy departments and promoting it as an autonomous science against the spirit of their teacher. Of Wundt, it has been written: "His *corpus* is riven by tensions and ambiguities, and though his work has undergone periodic scholarly reconsiderations, Wundt's lasting importance for the field of psychology remains the topic of lively debate among psychologists" (Kim, 2008). But although all the above assertions are true, they nonetheless ignore Wundt's philosophical presuppositions and his broad understanding of psychology as focused on inner contents thus downplaying the dynamic aspects of mental activity. That is, although Wundt's broad understanding of psychology allowed him to expand the role of the discipline to include phenomena such as cultural activity and the use of language (these latter aspects of experience were discussed in his *Völkerpsychologie*, 2 vols, originally published 1909), consciousness in Wundt's system, by contrast, was identified with the inner world of experience and closely tied to "individual psychology". Wundt's relegation of conscious processes or mental states as amenable to studies of "individual psychology" led him to embrace a qualified form of introspection as viable for studying the mind. What the "mental" amounts to for Wundt is therefore something akin to the immediately perceived contents of awareness; these contents are said to be "inner" only in the sense that they cannot be identified with nervous system or other objective and transcendent bodies

or substances. Instead, Wundt introduces a methodological strategy for classifying and studying mental contents amounting to a refined form of *Selbstbeobachtung* (i.e. self-observation). Wundt's individual psychology stressed the psychologist as special observer who could be trained to correctly (in a laboratory setting) attain introspective access to the activity of the psychologist's own mental contents. Brentano in his PES tellingly mocked this "secret method" as one that produced, not psychologists, but rather headaches (PES, 30\PES-G, 37).

After Wundt's death the narrative of "Wundt the proto-structuralist" (see Hothersall, 1984, 103–4) came to dominate accounts of his methodology. It was therefore this Wundt, the introspectionist and analyzer of mental contents, who came under the critical scrutiny of the Würzburg psychologists. The latter claimed to be able to identify imageless thoughts in the laboratory (see Kush, 1999, who lists Marbe, Ach, and Bühler as the significant figures in these studies). Wundt forcefully attacked these new studies and methods (see again Kush, 1999, 12ff. 51ff.) and this separated his approach and distanced his position even further from the study of psychological processes at the heart of Brentano's approach. Finally, however, when the introspectionist paradigm and experimentalist or laboratory model of mind (with its focus on measuring "mental contents") rightly came to be criticized and discredited – first by the experiments of the Würzburg school and later by the rise of functionalist approaches to understanding the mind (the latter quickly superseded by behaviorism) all previous "mental thought" models were deemed "unscientific".

This turn of the tide sent not only Wundt and his followers, but also Brentano and his own students (such as Meinong and Stumpf, etc.) with their very different approaches for understanding the mind, into neglect. This brings us to the situation that holds today, i.e. that the system in the PES can be viewed as, for all practical purposes, an untried path in contemporary psychology and philosophy of mind. Therefore, even if Brentano's quite significant influence on later philosophy and social science (outlined above) is ignored, there are intrinsic aspects of his thought that render it important. Brentano entered what was known as "the psychophysics debate" in late nineteenth century psychology with compelling and still valid criticisms of Gustav Fechner's and Wundt's quantitative approaches to understanding the mental. In contrast to the later experimentalist tradition, Brentano viewed mental life as dynamic and approached the study of cognition as a philosopher. As a consequence Brentano's thought can provide philosophically rich and well-articulated conceptual resources that can help add to and enhance

our study of philosophy of mind and the mental itself. This stands in contrast to the situation that frequently holds in contemporary philosophy of mind, i.e. the uncritical or dogmatic application of categories borrowed from other established sciences or disciplines, such as physics or sociology, to the study of experience. Otherwise, the conceptual framework for analysis of the mind is dominated by positivist inspired ontological frameworks guided by empirical or logical analyses that ignore the concrete and intrinsic richness of immediate experience in favor of anemic models of propositional reference determined by linguistically patterned intensional states. One of the untapped benefits and intrinsic merits of Brentano's philosophical approach for understanding mental life, by contrast, is that it can both be put to use in clarifying existing approaches as well as contribute to formulating a more coherent model for understanding consciousness or so-called psychic (intentional) acts and their correlates.

Among other important intrinsic aspects of Brentano's thought are, for example, its tacit demarcation and explication of the differences between genetic and descriptive psychology.⁹ This distinction was a major factor in helping to ground the theoretical justification of the scientific status of psychology in the late nineteenth century. Brentano's pioneering work in the area of scientific psychology, as witnessed especially by his analyses in the system presented in the PES, also includes contributions towards theoretically elucidating the foundations of psychology, a topic still of great interest to philosophers and psychologists today. Brentano's attempt at establishing psychology as a science should still hold our interest if only because he undertook this pioneering endeavor with a sophisticated understanding of the epistemological and metaphysical implications of assaying the structures of experience. Therefore the system of the PES can help highlight and bring into focus the difficult problem of the elaboration and demarcation of the "psychic" or "mental" from the "physical". In many ways the above distinction, as it was outlined by Brentano in 1874, i.e. through the reintroduction and reworking of the intentional nature of the mental, is one of the most successful attempts at arriving at a thematic and compelling way to understand the problem of consciousness and human mental life within modern philosophy. Closely related to the theme of the demarcation of psychic and intentional mental acts is another aspect of the PES that is also frequently overlooked; namely, the importance of Brentano's text for attempting to articulate the problem of the broader relationship and dichotomy between the so-called hard, objective and positivistic sciences and the "spiritual"

or subjective or qualitative and observer dependent, social or human sciences. Although this problem was later popularized and treated in greater detail by contemporaries, especially the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (in the important first volume of his *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, i.e. "Introduction to the Human Sciences"), Brentano's original establishing of the problem is still significant.

In his study of the human sciences, Dilthey argued that we must avoid both the reductionism of the positivists and the speculative excesses of the German idealists in order to properly understand psychology and history. Dilthey went on to characterize the separation between the sciences and the humanities as the gap between the natural (*Natur*) or objectivist and humanistic or "spiritual" sciences (*Geisteswissenschaft*). Dilthey's introduction to the above problem, published in 1883, was directly influenced by Brentano. It was also Brentano who had already clearly thematized that problem, building on insights from his (and Dilthey's) one-time teacher Friedrich Adolf Trendelenburg.¹⁰ The distinction between the immediately grasped truths of experience (the intuitive and immediately known non-propositional ground of knowledge) and discursive or symbolic and scientific knowledge (characterizing the quantitative methods of the so-called hard sciences) as developed by Brentano can be seen as an attempt to explore cognition and understand perception and action holistically. Furthermore in attempting to clarify the structures of lived experience and to facilitate the above explorations into the framework of the sciences, Brentano reduces all epistemological frameworks for articulating theoretical activity into a unified model based on kinds or categories of science and correlative modes of knowing.¹¹ Brentano's framework, which grounds objective knowledge and articulates the nature of conceptual content in a descriptive or phenomenological foundation, is still relevant today.¹²

Furthermore Brentano's broader focus on the themes of intentional relations, inherent to psychic acts, also complements contemporary philosophy of mind in other significant ways. Contemporary philosophy of mind was given a strong incentive to growth and reform with the formulation of new methodological tools developed for the most part in the late nineteenth century. Growing out of an explicitly anti-psychologistic approach for formulating logical and semantic theories, these new conceptual tools were subsequently used to develop new doctrines pertaining to the foundations of logic and mental reference. These doctrines were characterized by a methodological and philosophical tendency towards breaking from naïve empiricism and direct reference theories of meaning. In many ways these advances were