
I. THE INCIPIENT PHASE

FRANZ BRENTANO, THE “GRANDFATHER OF PHENOMENOLOGY” AND THE SPIRIT OF THE TIMES

BRENTANO, TEACHER OF HUSSERL

In the literature on Husserl there is a marked tendency to interpret the thought of the founder of phenomenology in the light of his later works, particularly focusing on *The Crisis of European Sciences*, which deals with the fundamental concept of *Lebenswelt*, as well on the themes of passive synthesis and inter-subjectivity, which were central concerns of this phase. Another dominant approach tends to view phenomenology purely in terms of transcendental phenomenology, a concept systematically developed in *Ideas I* of 1913, the text that most clearly reveals the closeness of Husserl to neo-Kantian movements.

While undoubtedly legitimate, such approaches presuppose the presence of some immanent directive idea driving the development of Husserl's entire work and, in so doing, tend to impose corresponding directive criteria for its comprehension and interpretation. They therefore underplay the slow and complex evolution of the founder of phenomenology, the conceptual work to which he submitted his early ideas, and his continual effort to give them more precise definition and radically greater depth. This is even more true in considering the initial phase of Husserl's work, which preceded and paved the way for *Logical Investigations*, a phase when the influence of his teacher Franz Brentano was strong and decisive. The fact that it was later dismissed by Husserl himself as being “psychologistic”, does not justify its removal or neglect. On the contrary, it must be evaluated historically in terms of the preparatory stage for the development of a line of thinking that would lead, through the above-mentioned work of conceptual clarification and investigation, to an increasingly precise definition of the sphere of action of phenomenology.

In the light of such remarks, we intend to review some of the crucial points along the philosophical itinerary traveled by Brentano, the man whom Husserl considered “my one and only teacher in philosophy” and from whose

lessons the then youthful mathematician “first acquired . . . the conviction that philosophy, too, is a field of serious endeavor, and that it too can—and in fact must—be dealt in rigorous scientific manner”. (Husserl, 1919, 154; translation, 48)

The outstanding feature of Brentano's philosophical propositions, which surfaces in the work of all his pupils, is the attribution of an essentially philosophical value to psychological investigation, which is in turn the basis for the revival and renewal of philosophy as a scientific discipline, whose crisis he imputes to the abandonment of the empirical method of research and the surrender to the speculative temptations typifying idealistic philosophy. It is in the singular blend of Aristotelian, Cartesian and Empiricist elements permeating this project that we uncover a series of decisive ideas which, critically perceived, were to influence profoundly the work of Husserl.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Franz Brentano was born in Marienberg, near Boppard am Rhein, on January 16, 1838. In the same year his family moved to Aschaffenburg, where the young Brentano underwent a rigidly Catholic education. The Brentano family, of distant Italian origin, were of considerable standing in the German cultural world. His father, Christian, writer of religious pamphlets, was the brother of Clemens Brentano and Bettina von Arnim and the brother-in-law of Carl von Savigny.

After early studies in Munich (1856/57) and a brief period at Würzburg, without finding any suitable teacher to oversee his higher education, Brentano moved to Berlin in 1858 to study under Friedrich Adolf Trendelenburg, the great promoter of the Aristotelian revival in 19th-century Germany. He finally went on to Münster to become a pupil of Franz Jacob Clemens, a major exponent of Neo-Thomism during the nineteenth century, who introduced him to the study of medieval interpretations of Aristotle and Thomism. Brentano concluded his studies in 1862, with the dissertation *On the Several Senses of Being in Aristotle*, presented at the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Tübingen, where, *in absentia*, he obtained his doctorate in philosophy.

After further studies in theology in Munich and Würzburg, Brentano was ordained to the priesthood in 1864. He continued the studies on Aristotle begun with his dissertation, and in 1866, he submitted the work *The Psychology of Aristotle*, to qualify as a *Privatdozent* at Würzburg. This marked the beginning of an extraordinarily successful period as a teacher, during which he

was to count among his group of first enthusiastic disciples Anton Marty, Carl Stumpf and Hermann Schell.

In the meantime, however, Brentano's life was upset by a series of events. The declaration of the dogma of papal infallibility, proclaimed in 1870 by the First Vatican Council, gave birth to his first religious doubts, triggering a crisis that eventually led him, on Good Friday 1873, to abandon the priesthood, and later, in 1879, to leave the Catholic Church. Such events were not without serious consequences for Brentano's academic career; in 1873 he resigned from the professorship he had acquired the previous year.

Between 1872 and 1873 Brentano traveled widely: to England, where he met Herbert Spencer, St. George Mivart and Cardinal Newman, to Paris and, finally Leipzig, where he met, among others, Gustav T. Fechner, Ernst H. Weber, and Moritz W. Drobisch. At this time, he was writing his best-known work, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, and Leipzig was already the center of the avant-garde in German psychological studies.

Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint came out in 1874, the same year in which Brentano, with the decisive support of Rudolf Hermann Lotze, obtained a full professorship in philosophy at the University of Vienna. Here, he was to repeat the enormous success of the Würzburg period, again placing him at the center of a group of enthusiastic pupils, including, to cite some of the most distinguished, not only Husserl, but also Alexius Meinong, Christian von Ehrenfels, Kasimir Twardowski, Alois Höfler, Thomas Masaryk, Franz Hillebrand. To these must be added the *Enkelschüler* Oskar Kraus, Alfred Kastil, Josef Eisenmeier, Emil Utitz and Hugo Bergmann. His "school" was destined to permeate the entire academic world of the Hapsburg Empire, with Marty becoming professor at Czernowitz and, later on, in Prague; Stumpf, in the meantime, became Brentano's successor at Würzburg, moving on to Prague (and then to Halle, where Husserl was his pupil, *Munich and finally Berlin*). Also active in Prague were Ehrenfels, Masaryk and Kraus. Meinong was called to Graz, Twardowski to Lemberg, Hillebrand and Kastil to Innsbruck.

Whilst in Vienna, Brentano was introduced to Ida von Lieben, the sister of a colleague; his decision to marry her gave rise to considerable problems since a clause of the Austrian Civil Code, of controversial interpretation, forbade ex-priests to marry. To obviate this difficulty, Brentano acquired Saxon citizenship and married Ida von Lieben in Leipzig. However, his acquisition of a new citizenship automatically meant the loss of his university post. Brentano went through the process of re-qualifying

in Vienna in the hope of getting his professorship back, but was unfortunately disappointed. As a result, he persevered in his activities as a mere *Privatdozent*, continuing to win over disciples, but without any real academic power. His bitterness over the failure of his attempts at reconfirmation, made all the more difficult to bear by the death of his wife, was compounded by appointment of his pupil Franz Hillebrand as the head of the psychology laboratory that he had for years been requesting from the Austrian authorities, all of which eventually convinced him, in 1895, to leave Vienna and, after a brief period in Switzerland, move to Italy.

After short stays in Rome and Palermo, Brentano settled in Florence with his second wife, Emilie Ruprecht, who he married in 1897 and with whom he also had a son. By this time, Brentano was already suffering from the serious sight problems that would gradually lead to blindness and was forced to entrust his reflections to dictation. It was in these years that he elaborated the new version of his thought that is generally referred to as "reism". While resident in Italy, he maintained contact with his students, either during the summers spent at his house in Schönbühel, in Wachau, or by regular mail correspondence, on a truly impressive scale (his letters to Marty alone number about 1,400, some of which are twenty pages long).

On Italy's entry into the World War I, in 1915, Brentano moved to Zurich, where he died on March 17, 1917.

BRENTANO'S PHILOSOPHICAL TRAINING

Brentano's philosophical training took place in the climate of renewed interest in Aristotle that dominated a significant part of post-idealistic German thought. In his dissertation *On the Several Senses of Being in Aristotle*—a work that, as is known, profoundly influenced the young Heidegger—Brentano undertakes an analysis of Aristotle's ontology and theory of categories. With his second work, *The Psychology of Aristotle*, Brentano makes a detailed analysis of Aristotle's *De anima*, particularly dwelling on the complex problem of the *noûs poietikos*. Here, it is already possible to note the polarity and complementarity of ontology and psychology, of the ontological-metaphysical inquiry and philosophy of mind that would permeate all the subsequent development of his thought.

Although such youthful works are generally historical in character, they are clearly dominated by the proposal for a theoretic recovery of the Aristotelian heritage, conceived as the starting point for a new scientific foundation

of philosophy in opposition to the one proposed by the neo-Kantian movement. This foundation is not in fact based on the revival of the Kantian interrogatives concerning the conditions of possibility of experience, but on Aristotelian metaphysics as the “science of being as being”. Brentano, on the other hand, significantly reflects the reception of positivist themes which the Germany of the day had absorbed from French and English thought, although reformulating them in an independent and original way, in particular, giving them a distinctive psychological slant, thanks to the influence of Herbartianism.

The singular convergence of Aristotelian and positivistic themes must be taken in the light of Brentano’s particular Aristotelian training, which is of far greater complexity than is usually maintained. Brentano, in fact, was not only the Catholic priest whose approach to Aristotle rests heavily on a scholastic, especially Thomistic interpretative base; Brentano was also the pupil of Trendelenburg, the promoter of the *Aristoteles-Renaissance* in 19th-century Protestant Germany. The methodological-epistemological curvature of Trendelenburg’s Aristotelianism is, in this regard, of decisive importance, namely, his conviction that the development of philosophical reflection must take place in strict continuity with that of the single sciences: within this view, philosophy stands at the vertex of the system of sciences, of which, in its universality (in a perspective both ontological and logical-methodological) it is naturally supreme. Certainly far from casual is Trendelenburg’s preparatory role in the penetration of French, but especially English positivism in late-19th-century Germany; neither is it coincidental that the young Brentano, in confronting the need to re-assess Aristotelian enquiry in the light of the epistemological concerns emerging from contemporary philosophical and scientific debate, should focus his attention on some of the major exponents of Positivism—foremost Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill.

Of relevance in this regard, is the principle upheld in Brentano’s fourth qualification thesis: *Vera philosophiae methodus nulla alia nisi scientiae naturalis est* (the true method of philosophy is none other than that of natural sciences). (Brentano, 1929, 136f) This thesis represents one of the cornerstones of Brentano’s philosophy and, together with the doctrine of the four phases of philosophy,¹ motivated the young philosopher’s faith in the future progress of philosophy. It was precisely this faith, bolstered by a strong missionary drive and by an extraordinary argumentative clarity and rigor, which so impressed his students, making them enthusiastic

disciples and participants in the grandiose project of their teacher.

PSYCHOLOGY FROM AN EMPIRICAL STANDPOINT

The complex interweaving of motives, the network of influences described above, provide a key to our understanding of Brentano’s project for a “psychology from an empirical standpoint”, which he saw as a foundation for the entire philosophical edifice. *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* is in effect a unique work in the philosophical and psychological panorama of late-19th-century Germany. Published in a cultural climate that had lost all belief in the possibility of a rational psychology, it set out to develop a new scientific psychology capable of ensuring a re-foundation of philosophy, allowing it to emerge from the foundational crisis into which it had fallen. While the spirit in which he sets about renewing the methods and content of psychological science reflects the cultural climate of the day, we cannot consider Brentano’s psychology on the same plane as other contemporary “psychologistic” projects, without losing the freshness and originality that characterizes this work. And its originality lies in the singular recovery of the Aristotelian tradition.

On close reading, Brentano’s “psychology from an empirical standpoint” is none other than Aristotelian psychology, with methods and content adapted to make it more palatable to the contemporary public. It is a psychology that can provide a node, a convergence point for the numerous and divergent courses of contemporary psychological science. Brentano thus sacrifices the traditional (and Aristotelian) assumption which sees psychology as the “science of the soul”, preferring to invoke, with F. A. Lange, a “psychology without a soul”. (*PeS* I, 16; translation, 11) The soul, Brentano states, is a metaphysical concept and cannot as such be placed among the *premises* of an empirical psychology, which programmatically aims at dealing with phenomena and not absolute entities. On the basis of such considerations, Brentano defines psychology as the “science of mental phenomena” and, he can conveniently delimit the latter by having recourse to the Aristotelian paradigm of the “intentional inexistence of the object”, thus re-introducing into contemporary debate the concept of intentionality.

With this term, borrowed from medieval Scholasticism, Brentano outlines the relational and directional character of mental phenomena, how they are always directed towards something, towards an object. Apart from the terminological derivation, Brentano takes the principle of “intentional inexistence” directly from

Aristotle: the mental phenomenon is always directed towards an object, it is an act, an *energeia*, that is to say the realization of a capacity initially present in the subject as purely a potential. In particular, it is Aristotle's theory of perception that functions as a paradigm in positing the concept of "intentional inexistence". According to Aristotle, the sensation consists of an alteration or modification induced in the perceiver by the outer sensible object. However, the modification implicit in the sensation is not a mere submission leading to an alteration of the perceiver, his or her corruption by something opposite. The sensation represents a cognitive modification of the perceiver and not his or her effective alteration. Thus, it cannot resolve itself in the material or physical presence of the sensible objects in the perceiver, but in their *objective presence*: feeling the cold does not mean being or becoming physically cold, but to perceptively appropriate something which is present in us "as an object" (*objective*). (Brentano, 1867, 80.)

Brentano's doctrine of intentionality will receive more detailed analysis below. For the time being, it is sufficient to underline the Aristotelian matrix of the concept of "intentional inexistence", as well as of the fundamental distinction between physical phenomena and mental phenomena on which Brentano founded his psychology. In Brentano, physical phenomena are not in fact the "objects" of our everyday experience, but that which is perceived by us without any form of inductive or conceptual mediation. Physical phenomena (colors, sounds, tastes, etc.) are spatially determined sensible qualities. Within an Aristotelian framework, physical phenomena are special sensible connected with the common sensible spatial form or shape. Mental phenomena are the co-respective acts, coordinated with them, but not reducible to them: *seeing* (a color), *hearing* (a sound), *tasting* (a flavor).

So far Brentano's conception of the mental act or phenomenon can be seen as an adaptation of the corresponding conception of Aristotle. There is, however, an aspect of the Aristotelian theory of perception that is drastically revised, namely, its cognitive validity. With Aristotle outer perception directed to the special sensible is immune from error, whilst for Brentano the perception of the physical phenomenon is always illusory. Colors, sounds, tastes, etc. evidently exist only for the ingenuous and unreflective consciousness, ignorant of the most elementary tenets of physical science. Against the ingenuous realism of Aristotle, so close to the position of common sense, speaks the entire development of modern science, which has led us to conceive of physical reality as a mechanical game of extended

moving particles and to deprive the sensible qualities, so refractory to mathematical analysis, of any objective consistence.

Thus, for Aristotle the intentional sense-object or special sensible is the accidental determination of a substance which by causally acting on the perceiver imposes on the act of perception a dependence that is causal in character; for Brentano the same object (the special sensible or physical phenomenon) simply does not exist, *either* externally *or* internally to consciousness. Basing himself on the results of modern physical science and adopting the Helmholtz's theses of critical realism, he affirms that physical phenomena are only "symbols" (*Zeichen*) of real entities or processes that are not directly accessible (atoms, molecule, electromagnetic waves, etc.); by acting causally on the perceiver, they produce in him a presentation which provides only an approximate indication of them.

At this point it seems legitimate to wonder what Brentano has gained by adopting intentionality as the distinctive criterion of mental phenomena, i.e., a concept belonging to a theory of perception and, more in general, to a theory of knowledge that is no longer palatable, except with radical revision, to the contemporary public. True to the principle according to which the real Aristotelian can and must know how to go beyond Aristotle himself, Brentano believes that the solution to these difficulties is that indicated by Descartes and British Empiricism, Locke in particular. In line with this tradition, Brentano sees the mental phenomenon as something more than a mere *act* of perception: it is, in its intrinsic nature, *conscious*, which means that there must exist within the mental act itself a moment that makes possible our consciousness of it. That is the function of *inner perception*, which Brentano considers a further distinctive criterion of the mental act, one closely coordinated, however, with intentionality. Inner perception, through which we are conscious of our mental acts, is not in fact an autonomous act of reflection directed towards the actual mental phenomenon; it is instead a different *intentional direction* which characterizes, as a secondary component, every mental act. Were the consciousness of a mental act to be superimposed, in a certain sense, from without onto the act itself, it would open up the way to an infinite chain of deferment, and we would be forced to admit an unconscious mental activity in order to close the series. Instead, it is in the single mental act with which we take in the (primary) object, where we find the very consciousness of perception, as its moment or non-independent part. The consciousness that accompanies each mental act is a secondary or accessory (*en parergo*)

consciousness, due to a reflective off-shoot of our attention, *primarily* directed towards the intentional object of the said act. Inner perception thus considered is the only source of self-evidence. It is the sole “insightful” evidence insofar as it is wholly identified with its object, which is apprehended free of any residual elements. It is assertoric, immediate, and anterior to the position of any distinction between subject and object.²

The fact that the mental phenomenon is *conscious*, i.e., grasped by the concomitant inner perception, does not mean for Brentano—and this is a decisive point—that it is *observed* by the subject. The reflective consciousness that accompanies the mental phenomenon cannot be an explicit, thematic or “distinct” consciousness of the mental phenomenon itself; that is to say it can never transform itself into an “inner observation” (*innere Beobachtung*). The reason for this impossibility lies in the very nature of the secondary reference, which is incapable of fixing or objectifying the mental phenomenon, without modifying its essence. This is illustrated by the example of rage. When angry, we are of course conscious of the rage by which we are affected; the fact that we feel it necessarily implies that we are conscious of it. It does not mean, however, that such consciousness can be transformed into an inner observation, almost as if we could fix our rage, with an attitude of detachment, without, that is, essentially altering the original state of mind.

The fact that inner perception can never transform itself into inner observation undoubtedly sets psychology at a disadvantage with respect to the natural sciences. Memory provides some degree of help, being able to analyze and therefore “observe”, i.e., to address as its primary objects mental phenomena that have just taken place. A further contribution can also come from the “objective observation” of the external manifestations of mental phenomena in the form of language and behavior. Such methodological instruments that complement inner perception appear indeed indispensable to fill the gaps inherent in the purely psychological methods; recourse to objective observation remains however an auxiliary procedure, which cannot in anyway claim to replace that which is the true “experiential basis” of psychology.

GENESIS VERSUS DESCRIPTION

It is revealing that neither in the long methodological section, nor at any other point in *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* does Brentano refer to the methodological procedure of description. Description is entirely absent, and this in spite of the fact that the object

of psychological enquiry, the “mental phenomenon” or “consciousness”, is analyzed and classified according to its structure, as well as adequately differentiated against the background of its physical-physiological determinants. This fact and the complex apparatus of auxiliary methodological tools introduced to overcome the limits of inner perception bear witness to how Brentano, in 1874, had not yet explicitly formulated the distinction between genetic psychology and descriptive psychology, between diachronic causal investigation, directed towards identifying the genesis of mental phenomena, and synchronic morphological investigation. This aims at providing a taxonomy of the essential structures that together make up mental life, which only became of extreme importance a decade later. The “empirical standpoint” to which Brentano feels bound in 1874 in the development of psychology as a science depends as much on the description and classification of mental phenomena as on the identification of their laws of succession, considered as a logical and necessary integration of the classification. It is true that psychological enquiry presupposed the identification, in descriptive terms, of the essential features of mental phenomena and, on this basis, the delineation of their fundamental classes; however, its ultimate goal consists of the identification, by inductive means, of the general laws governing the development and succession of mental phenomena, valid for the entire realm of mental life. (*PeS* I, 62f; translation, 44f.) Such laws cannot, however, claim validity as ultimate and fundamental laws, like those of gravity and inertia in physics, due to the lack of available knowledge concerning the physiological conditions causing the insurgence of mental phenomena. In addition, compared to the laws of the natural sciences, psychological laws are not only incomplete, but also imprecise because of the insufficient, if not impossible application of mathematics in psychological enquiry. They are, Brentano emphasizes, “empirical laws” which, from both viewpoints, are in need of integration.

The problematic, if not contradictory character of Brentano’s position has been underlined: on the one hand, he wishes to develop psychology on an empirical basis, while on the other, it is precisely the empiric nature of psychological laws that makes them vague and imprecise. Brentano’s theses become comprehensible if one considers how, in this phase, his scientific ideal was the Comtian one of deductive science, in which the empirical dimension is progressively absorbed into the rational one, expressed by the law. The purpose of science is to explain observed phenomena in terms of precise and immutable laws, and to reduce the number of these laws



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