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Brentano's Modification of the Medieval-Scholastic Concept of 'Intentional Inexistence' in *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (1874)

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Brentano is perhaps most famously renowned for his re-deployment of Scholastic terminology of 'intentional act' and 'intentional object' in the elaboration of his novel science of 'descriptive psychology' in the mid-1870s and 1880s. In this re-deployment, however, Brentano adapted the original Scholastic meanings of both of these terms. Thus Brentano advanced not one but two descriptive-psychological theses of intentionality.¹ These theses, however, are often not properly distinguished, and consequently they are more often confused. Nevertheless, once the two theses are distinguished, Brentano's basic descriptive-psychological tenet of the intentionality of consciousness is more readily understandable on its own terms. Whether Brentano's descriptive-psychological tenet is entirely acceptable philosophically, or not, of course, is another matter but this presupposes understanding in a straightforward sense what Brentano's doctrine is. In this article, I will be concerned mainly with Brentano's re-introduction of 'what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object' in *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (1874),² even though it is Brentano's (second) thesis on 'intentional act', one that he developed after his 1874 publication, that is more generally well known and examined. While acknowledging that many versions of 'Brentano's thesis', as it is usually (and loosely) referred to by commentators today, have been re-worked in modern philosophy of mind, this article focuses attention on some of the main points of convergence and deviance between the original Scholastic concept and Brentano's 'new' concept of intentionality in *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*.

1.1 Introduction

In a reference to Brentano's concept of the intentionality of consciousness, Husserl tells us that 'his [Brentano's] conversion (*Umwertung*) of the scholastic concept of intentionality into a descriptive root-concept of psychology constitutes a great discovery, apart from which phenomenology could not have come into being at all'.³ This article will not examine Husserl's advancement of Brentano's descriptive-psychological concept of intentionality because in order to address this matter, one would need to present a detailed study of the development of Husserl's thought from his earliest descriptive-psychological investigations in his *Philosophy of Arithmetic* (1891), through his extensive descriptive-eidetic-psychological analyses in the two volumes of *Logical Investigations* (1900–1901), to his turn towards transcendental idealism in *Ideas: Book I* (1913), and to his later writings. Fortunately, Theodore De Boer, in his masterful study *The Development of Husserl's Thought*, has undertaken both an extensive and a meticulous examination of the unfolding of the concept of intentionality in Husserl's thought from his earliest writings, through his well-known *Logical Investigations*, and to his transition to transcendental idealism (around 1907–1908) that was later made known through Husserl famous and celebrated 'reduction' of the natural standpoint to the transcendental-phenomenological standpoint in *Ideas I* (1913).⁴ Rather, in this article, I

wish to draw attention back to Brentano's initial 'revaluation' (*Umwertung*) of the Scholastic concept of intentionality in order to determine some of the main features which Brentano accepts, rejects and adapts from the Scholastic account in the elaboration of his new concept of intentionality. An assessment of the originality of 'Brentano's thesis' of intentionality, therefore, is the main focus of this article.

§1.2 Background: Disagreement Over Interpretations of 'Brentano's Thesis'

Commentators and critics today *still* disagree among themselves about the originality (or lack of originality) of Brentano's concept of intentionality. And they disagree about the originality (or lack of originality) of Brentano's concept in respect to *both* the scholastic concept *and* the Husserlian concept of intentionality.⁵ No doubt, the fact that Brentano employs scholastic terminology in a new context (i.e. in 'descriptive psychology') is one the main sources that has evoked much hermeneutic disagreement and difficulty. Another potent source of hermeneutic confusion lies in the fact that several of Brentano's own immediate students and 'followers' (e.g. Meinong, Höfler, Twardowski, Husserl, Sartre, Chisholm, to mention but a few), all developed their own versions of 'Brentano's thesis of intentionality', whilst maintaining that each of their respective versions either adhered to or (critically) advanced 'Brentano's thesis', even though *such versions themselves* are notoriously different from each other.⁶ All of this complicates considerably the task of interpreting, understanding and assessing the historical and philosophical innovation of *Brentano's thesis*.⁷ *Whose* thesis and *which* thesis of intentionality that one is addressing and evaluating are important questions to bear in mind when dealing with this matter.⁸ Nevertheless, it is generally acknowledged that it is principally due to Brentano and to his students in the 1880s, and in particular to Husserl and to his extensive development of the tenet of the intentionality of consciousness in the elaboration of his idea of phenomenology in the 1900s, that the medieval-scholastic terminology of 'intentional act' and 'intentional object' re-gained widespread currency in philosophical circles in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

1.3 Brentano's Revaluation of the Scholastic Concept of Intentionality

Husserl first became acquainted with Brentano's doctrine of intentionality whilst attending Brentano's lectures at Vienna University from 1884–1886.⁹ Brentano, however, had re-introduced (and modified) the Scholastic concept of intentionality some ten years previously, in his unfinished study of *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (1874),¹⁰ and had developed his thesis of intentionality in his lecture-courses on 'Descriptive Psychology' in the 1880s and in the early 1900s.¹¹ A characteristic of Brentano's thought, therefore, as Husserl correctly remarks, is that 'it never stood still'.¹² Indeed, before Brentano began teaching in Vienna University in 1874 and before the publication of his *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* in the same year,¹³ Brentano had earned for himself a significant reputation as an Aristotelian scholar on the basis of two published works on Aristotle: namely, his 1862 doctoral dissertation *On the Several Senses of Being in Aristotle*, published in the same year, and his 1866 *Habilitationschrift*

The Psychology of Aristotle, In Particular His Doctrine of the Active Intellect, published in 1867.¹⁴ Hence Brentano's familiarity with Scholastic terminology.¹⁵

By the time Husserl began to attend Brentano's lectures in philosophy in Vienna University, therefore, Brentano's thinking had undergone several changes. First, Brentano had moved away from his original interest in Aristotle's metaphysics and psychology, in the 1860s, and towards matters of concern pertaining to the new budding natural science of empirical psychology, in the 1870s. Second, he was both advancing and applying his idea of 'descriptive psychology' to the founding of the normative disciplines of Ethics, Logic and Aesthetics in his lectures in the 1880s. Since it is in the context of 'descriptive psychology' that Brentano develops his new concept of intentionality, some general remarks about Brentano's novel idea of 'descriptive psychology' will be necessary.

1.4 Brentano's Distinction Between Descriptive and Genetic Psychology

According to Brentano, the natural science of empirical psychology can be divided up into two separate but component parts, namely, a 'descriptive psychology' and a 'genetic psychology'. The main task of 'descriptive psychology' is to describe clearly the phenomena for the science of empirical psychology. The main task of the 'genetic' part of the science of empirical psychology would be to then explain causally, by employing the method of the natural sciences, how such phenomena came into existence and went out of existence. Brentano borrowed this model of division from similar occurrences in the development of other natural sciences e.g. descriptive anatomy and physiology, geognosy and geogony (geology), and even coined the term 'Psychognosie' for the descriptive part of the science of empirical psychology.¹⁶ Brentano takes 'psychical phenomena' to be the main subject-matter of empirical psychology, and by 'psychical phenomena' Brentano means all conscious-act experiences (*Erlebnisse*) and their features as they occur in 'the mentally active subject'. Thus the class of 'psychical phenomena in general' constitutes a very broad range of 'phenomena' for Brentano, such as, for instance, sensing, willing, thinking, judging, understanding, misunderstanding, loving, hating, fearing, hoping, taking an interest in an object, taking no interest in an object (indifference), acts of disinterest, and so forth. However, Brentano tells us in 'Book II Psychological Phenomena In General' of *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* that he found do much 'confusion' and 'even self-contradiction among eminent psychologists' over their very use and meaning of the terms 'physical and psychical phenomena' that the corresponding natural sciences of physics and psychology that deal with these two basic 'classes' of phenomena could not hope to advance as separate but definitive natural sciences of 'physical and psychical phenomena' respectively unless such confusion was removed.¹⁷ Thus Brentano declares at the beginning of 'Book II Psychological Phenomena in General' that 'our aim is to clarify the meaning of the two terms "*physical phenomena*" and "*psychical phenomena*", removing all misunderstandings and confusion concerning them.'¹⁸ In order to address this task, Brentano believed that the only way open to him was to return to the origin of the meaning of the terms 'physical and psychical phenomena' in our experiences of such phenomena themselves and to focus on and

hopefully arrive at *a priori* evident items of knowledge about 'physical and psychical phenomena' in order to rule out any possible misunderstanding of the meaning of these two central terms. Only in this way could 'complete clarity' between psychologists and other natural scientists be reached, and the 'confusion' over the domains of enquiry for psychology and other natural sciences, in particular the science of physics that has established itself as the science of 'physical physical phenomena [as] they manifest themselves in a pure state', removed.¹⁹ The method of analysis that Brentano advocates for the descriptive part of the science of psychology, then, is essentially different to the method of observation, hypothesis and experimentation that is characteristic of the method of the natural sciences. *A fortiori* Brentano's descriptive method is essentially different to the genetic part of the science of empirical psychology. Instead of seeking empirically verifiable knowledge-claims that are both generally and hypothetically true for the most part about 'matters of fact', the science of descriptive psychology seeks to establish a unified system of intuitively grounded, *a priori* self-evident knowledge-claims about pure psychical-act experiences themselves.

Sometime after 1874, however, Brentano believed that his 'descriptive method' could be used to found the meaning of basic concepts employed in the normative sciences of Logic, Ethics and Aesthetics. This becomes the second function of descriptive psychology; one that is not tied to the preparation of the subject-matter for the empirical science of psychology.²⁰ Rather, the task now is to clarify the origins of our normative concepts in and through descriptive *a priori* analyses of consciousness since the method of the natural sciences, which concerns itself with 'matters of fact', as Hume would put it, is clearly inappropriate to accomplish this task. Laws of norm, Brentano insists, are to be sharply distinguished from laws of fact. In this regard, Brentano joins in the 'back to Kant' movement that emerged in Germany in the 1880s. It was at this time, then, when Brentano was developing further his idea of applying his 'descriptive method' to matters concerning the normative disciplines of Logic, Ethics and Aesthetics that Husserl attended his lectures.²¹

1.5 Brentano's Descriptive-Psychological Modification of the Scholastic Concept of Intentional Act

The particular 'revaluation' of the scholastic concept of intentionality, which Husserl alludes to in his 1931 Author's Preface to the first English translation of *Ideas* (1913), concerns Brentano's adaptation of the scholastic theory of the object-relatedness of acts of the will into a basic descriptive-psychological tenet regarding the object-relatedness of *all* psychical-act experiences (*Erlebnisse*) that are characteristic of human consciousness. About this adaptation, Brentano himself remarks in *The Origin of our Knowledge of Right and Wrong*, which was a lecture that Brentano delivered before the Vienna Law Society on January 23, 1889, and which he published in the same year:

The common feature of everything psychological often referred to, unfortunately, by the misleading term 'consciousness' (*Bewußtsein*), consists in a relation that we bear to an object. The relation has been called *intentional*; it is a relation to something which may not be actual but which is presented as an object. There is no

