

## Preface

This book is a survey of the most important developments in Austrian philosophy in its classical period from the 1870s to the Anschluss in 1938. But I hope that the volume will be seen also as a contribution to philosophy in its own right – as an attempt to philosophize in the spirit of those, above all Roderick Chisholm, Rudolf Haller, Kevin Mulligan and Peter Simons, who have done so much to demonstrate the continued fertility of the ideas and methods of the Austrian philosophers in our own day.

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## Introduction

For some time now, historians of philosophy have been gradually coming to terms with the idea that post-Kantian philosophy in the German-speaking world ought properly to be divided into two distinct traditions which we might refer to as the *German* and *Austrian* traditions, respectively. The main line of the first consists in a list of personages beginning with Kant, Fichte, Hegel and Schelling and ending with Heidegger, Adorno and Bloch. The main line of the second may be picked out similarly by means of a list beginning with Bolzano, Mach and Meinong, and ending with Wittgenstein, Neurath and Popper.

As should be clear, it is the Austrian tradition that has contributed most to the contemporary mainstream of philosophical thinking in the Anglo-Saxon world. For while there are of course German thinkers who have made crucial contributions to the development of exact or analytic philosophy, such thinkers were outsiders when seen from the perspective of native German philosophical culture, and in fact a number of them, as we shall see, found their philosophical home precisely in Vienna. When, in contrast, we examine the influence of the Austrian line, we encounter a whole series of familiar and unfamiliar links to the characteristic concerns of more recent philosophy of the analytic sort. As Michael Dummett points out in his *Origins of Analytic Philosophy*, the newly fashionable habit of referring to analytic philosophy as ‘Anglo-American’ is in this light a ‘grave historical distortion’. If, he says, we take into account the historical context in which analytic philosophy developed, then such philosophy ‘could at least as well be called “Anglo-Austrian”’ (1988, p. 7).

Much valuable scholarly work has been done on the thinking of Husserl and Wittgenstein, Mach and the Vienna Circle. The central axis of Austrian philosophy, however, which as I hope to show in what follows is constituted by the work of Brentano and his school, is still rather poorly understood. Work on Meinong or Twardowski by contemporary philosophers still standardly rests upon simplified and often confused renderings of a few favoured theses taken out of context. Little attention is paid to original sources, and little effort is devoted to establishing what the problems were by which the Austrian philosophers in general were exercised – in spite of the fact that many of these same problems have once more become important as a result of the

contemporary burgeoning of interest on the part of philosophers in problems in the field of cognitive science.

It is possible to define the concept of ‘Austrian philosophy’ in purely geographical terms, drawing up a list of those philosophers of importance who were born or settled within the borders of the Habsburg Empire from out of which modern Austria evolved. Such a list – which would embrace the philosophers of Prague, Cracow and Lvov/Lemberg as much as those of Vienna, Graz and Innsbruck – would include at the very least Bolzano, Mach, Brentano, Twardowski, Meinong, Ehrenfels, Husserl, Mally, Wittgenstein, Neurath, Carnap, Schlick, Waismann, Gustav Bergmann, Gödel and Popper. On the other hand, however, and more ambitiously, one might seek to lay down the marks or features of a certain way of doing philosophy that could be held to be characteristic of the thinkers on this list, and much of the relevant historiographical literature has pursued a line of this sort. Austrian philosophy, it is held, is marked by:

(i) The attempt to do philosophy in a way that is inspired by or is closely connected to empirical science (including psychology): this attempt is associated also with a concern for the unity of science. In the work of some of the Vienna positivists it is manifested in the extreme form of a physicalistic or phenomenalist reductionism. In the work of Brentano and his followers it relates rather to a unity of method as between philosophy and other disciplines.

(ii) A sympathy towards and in many cases a rootedness in British empiricist philosophy, a concern to develop a philosophy ‘from below’, on the basis of the detailed examination of particular examples.

(iii) A concern with the language of philosophy. This sometimes amounts to a conception of the critique of language as a tool or method; sometimes it leads to attempts at the construction of a logical ideal language. In many cases it manifests itself in the deliberate employment of a clear and concise language for the purposes of philosophical expression and in a sensitivity to the special properties of those uses and abuses of language which are characteristic of certain sorts of philosophy.

(iv) A rejection of the Kantian revolution and of the various sorts of relativism and historicism which came in its wake. Instead we find different forms of realism and of ‘objectivism’ (in logic, value theory, and elsewhere –

illustrated in Bolzano's concept of the proposition in itself and in Popper's doctrine of the 'third world').

(v) A special relation to the *a priori*, conceived not however in Kantian terms but in terms of a willingness to accept disciplines such as phenomenology and Gestalt theory which are, as Wittgenstein expressed it, 'midway between logic and physics'. (The question as to how such apriorism can be consistent with a respect for empirical science will be one of the issues to be addressed below.)

(vi) A concern with ontological structure, and more especially with the issue as to how the parts of things fit together to form structured wholes. In some cases this involves the recognition of differences of ontological level among the entities revealed to us by the various sciences and a consequent readiness to accept a certain stratification of reality.

(vii) An overriding interest in the relation of macro-phenomena (for example in social science or ethics) to the mental experiences or other micro-phenomena which underlie or are associated with them. This need not imply any *reduction* of complex wholes to their constituent parts or moments. Certainly a reductionism of this sort is present in Mach and in some of the Vienna positivists, but it is explicitly rejected by almost all the other thinkers mentioned.

There is much that is of value in this brief conspectus. Unfortunately, however, it is far from being the case that all the given features are shared in common by all the thinkers mentioned. Some philosophers on the list are marked precisely by the ways in which they reacted against one or other of the features mentioned, and some (for example Wittgenstein and Husserl) changed their relationship to these features over time. Moreover, many of the purported marks of 'Austrian philosophy' are exemplified also by thinkers who have nothing whatsoever to do with Austria in any recognizable (geographical) sense.

In what sense, then, can it be philosophically useful and historically legitimate to talk of 'Austrian philosophy' (defined, broadly, in terms of the features listed) as a single and coherent movement of thought? To answer this question it is necessary to refer once more to the German philosophy which served for Austrian philosophy as a never completely forgotten sparring-partner throughout the period of its development. What then springs to mind is the

degree to which the features mentioned have in German philosophy played almost no role at all – a fact which is all the more remarkable given the extent to which successive generations of German philosophers have differed so widely amongst themselves. Simplifying tremendously, we might say that German philosophy is determined primarily by its orientation around epistemology: attention is directed not to the world, but to our knowledge of the world. Moreover, even the latter is conceived largely in abstraction from knowledge actually gained and from the practices of scientists, in a way which can be seen to have thwarted the development of a native German tradition in the philosophy of science. This is sometimes connected further with what we might call the romantic element in German philosophy, a mode of thought which, in stressing the ultimate unintelligibility of the world, is often inimical to scientific theory.

The relation of philosophy to matters of scientifically established fact is in post-Kantian German philosophy therefore not normally a subject for investigation: the philosopher's world is in effect split apart from the empirical world of what happens and is the case. Certainly there are exceptions: for example Bauch, Natorp or Cassirer, but the exceptions, again, are overwhelmingly thinkers outside the mainstream of German philosophy, and in this light it is especially significant that the contributions of philosophically minded mathematicians such as Frege and Hilbert were not by German philosophers but by philosophers in England or Poland.

The main currents of German philosophy have moreover shown little sensitivity to the role of language in philosophy. They have tended to strive for philosophical *depth*, often at the expense of clarity, which they have associated with shallowness of thinking. Even Kant can be charged with some of the responsibility for certain stylistic excesses of his successors in this respect, and Neo-Kantians such as Rickert or Cohen, who attempted to develop a scientifically oriented philosophy in the spirit of Kant, never achieved in their writings the sort of clarity of language and precision of argument which we associate with Bolzano or Brentano.

German philosophy in the nineteenth century was to no small part a philosophy of idealism, more specifically a philosophy of idealism in its immanentistic variants – a doctrine according to which meaning, truth, value, and sometimes even the world as a whole, are seen as being immanent to (as real

constituent parts or ‘contents’ of) the mind or ego. Around the turn of our present century this immanentistic mode of philosophizing was subjected to attack from two quarters: in the Anglo-Saxon world, above all in the Cambridge of Russell and Moore; and in Austria by philosophers in Brentano school. It is in this connection that we shall justify our claim that it is Brentano and his followers who constitute the central axis of Austrian philosophy. This claim rests not merely on the personal dominance of Brentano and his pupils in universities throughout the Habsburg Empire and on the fact that it is Brentano and his pupils who came closest to instantiating those marks which have been picked out in the literature as characteristic of Austrian philosophy as a whole. It rests also, and most importantly, on the role Brentanian philosophers played in breaking through the restrictions of immanentism in philosophy (restrictions which affected also Brentano’s own thinking).

The Brentanian philosophers showed how to deal in rigorous, scientific fashion with mental reference to transcendent objects in a way which proved extraordinarily fruitful for the early development of exact or analytic philosophy on the continent of Europe, as it proved fruitful also in giving rise to movements of thought such as phenomenology and Gestalt psychology. For in working out their ‘theories of objects’, the Brentanian philosophers – in contrast to Frege and his successors – did not abandon psychological concerns. Rather, their work in ontology proceeded always in tandem with work on the cognitive processes in which the corresponding objects are experienced, and it is in thus spanning the gulf between ontology and psychology in non-reductionistic fashion that the members of the Brentano school can be seen to have anticipated certain crucial aspects of contemporary cognitive science.