

STUDY GUIDE 2025

BRENTANO (1838-1917)

Introduction

Franz Brentano was a German-Austrian philosopher and psychologist who sought to restore philosophy to a scientific foundation by rooting it in psychology as the study of mental phenomena. He is often described as a “philosopher of transition” — bridging Scholasticism and modern phenomenology. His most enduring contribution is the concept of intentionality, which became central to later philosophy of mind and phenomenology. “Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself.” — Franz Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (1874)

LIFE AND WORKS

*Born in Germany 1838-1917 of a German-Italian aristocratic (Christian) family.

*He studied mathematics, poetry, philosophy, and theology in Munich, Würzburg, and Berlin.

*Influenced by British Empiricists like J.S. Mill.

*He was ordained a priest in 1864 and left the priesthood in 1873 after rejecting papal infallibility (First Vatican Council, 1870). And a university professor at the University of Vienna (1874-1895); he influenced Husserl, Meinong, Freud, Stumpf, and Twardowski.

*His major work is entitled *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*. The first volume was published in 1874, a second volume (*The Classification of Mental Phenomena*) in 1911, and fragments of the third volume (*Sensory and Noetic Consciousness*) were published posthumously by Oskar Kraus in 1928.

*As a teacher, his aim was to inculcate in his students, the ability to think in a critical and scientific manner without holding prejudices from schools of thought and traditions of thinking. Brentano was admired for his clarity, method, and dedication to combining empirical observation with philosophical reflection.

*Later became blind and most of his later manuscripts were thanks to the assistance of his wife who dictated the materials to him.

BRENTANO'S THESIS / PHILOSOPHY AS A RIGOROUS SCIENCE

Brentano holds a distinctive position in the history of philosophy, setting himself apart from the German idealism that characterized his time. While thinkers like Kant and his contemporaries emphasized the primacy of the mind over matter, Brentano considered himself a trailblazer, forging new pathways in both philosophy and psychology. Given his idea of philosophy as a rigorous science, Brentano believed that philosophy had lost its way in abstract speculation. To restore its scientific rigor, it must begin with empirical psychology - the careful description of mental phenomena.

Brentano contends that philosophy ought to adopt the methodologies of the natural sciences—such as physics, biology, and chemistry—that focus on matter and objectively measurable phenomena. In his Habilitation defense in 1866, he articulated that the appropriate approach for philosophy is aligned with natural science methods.

Brentano's rejection of a singular 'first philosophy' and his proposal of a distinctive method for philosophical inquiry challenge conventional philosophical thought. He dismissed the notion of a single discipline capable of uncovering genuine philosophical truths, advocating instead for a more interconnected approach that could serve as a foundation for other sciences.

His commitment to conducting philosophy using rigorous scientific principles is truly inspiring. Brentano's assertion that philosophical psychology, in particular, should utilize methods rooted in observation, fact description, and induction—similar to those employed in the natural sciences—highlights his dedication to scientific rigor.

One could raise some counter arguments to Brentano's postulations:

1. What would you say to someone who argues that Brentano's emphasis on natural science methodologies may limit the scope and depth of philosophical inquiry beyond observable phenomena?
2. Have you considered the possibility that some philosophers might argue for a more abstract approach to philosophy that does not rely on empirical observation?
3. How would you address those who claim that the focus on psychological phenomena might overlook the importance of abstract concepts and ethics in philosophical discussions?

CRITICISM

Huemer Wolfgang, (a Prof. at the university of Parma in Italy) in his article, "Is Brentano's Method a Unifying Element of the Brentano School?" Argues that Brentano at his Habilitations-defense, merely states the thesis, but does not spell out in detail how a rigorous and scientific method could be applied in philosophy. It seems, thus, that he was mainly interested in stating how philosophy should not be done: Brentano's maxim arguably served to demarcate his own position from the dominant traditions of German idealism and system of philosophy.¹ At least he shifted ground from what dominated the philosophical landscape of his time – kind of paradigm shift.

However, years after his habilitation defense, Brentano defended his stand, no longer as a way of demarcating his position from the status quo but to fashion an alternate way for future development in the field of philosophy. His expansion on the need for his new method of philosophy was on two counts: First, he spelt out how to apply a rigorous and scientific method in the field of philosophy, especially philosophical psychology. Secondly, Brentano expanded

¹ Huemer Wolfgang, *Is Brentano's Method a Unifying Element of the Brentano School? Rivista di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica, CXI (2019), 4, pp. 897-910 ISSN: 00356247 (print) - 18277926 (digital) DOI: 10.26350/001050_000151*

the three periods in the history of philosophy (ancient, medieval and modern) to four phases to accommodate his method: the first phase is one of ascending development marked by theoretical interests. The second is that of divulgation, third skepticism and the fourth, mysticism.² However, through these phases that work in a dialectical manner he returns to the first thesis on ascending development as a way of establishing properly his task of a new method of philosophy - rigorous and scientific.

Modifying his stand on a scientific method, Brentano in his lecture series after the habilitation defense argues that his implies applying a rigorous and scientific style of reasoning by explicitly reflecting on questions concerning method in his lectures. For him, any rigorous scientific method must be appropriate for the observed phenomena.

Consequently, Brentano in the fourth edition of the *Habilitation* advocates the unity of sciences – implying a unity of method. His unity of method here according to commentators does not imply that all scientific disciplines be reduced to more basic disciplines, nor did he argue that they should adopt same method. Brentano argues that a method counts as scientific as long as it fulfills the minimal requirements of applying observation, description of facts, and induction. The specific method applied by a given discipline should be based on its object(s) of study. (*Explanation with different objects studied by different disciplines and their varying approaches*)

Expanding on divergent approaches in the wide scope of scientific methods of observation, he differed with J. F. Herbert in his bid to mathematize psychology, arguing that concepts used in mathematics lack empirical foundation and has no connection with phenomenon. According to him, any rigorous, scientific method must align with the observed relevant phenomena and establishing of general laws based on the principle of induction.

Importance of his method

*His standpoint regarding right method in philosophy influenced his psychology. This is evident in his work *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*. However, the unique nature of his method is based on the fact that psychology is anchored in observation performed from a **first-person point of view**. This means that the mind is given originally in subjective experience and therapists draw from self-experience of mental phenomenon. It implies that psychological phenomena - thoughts, feelings, intentions, perceptions - are first known from within, not from external observation. You experience your mental states before anyone can measure or describe them. Every mental act includes;

*a subject (I who think/feel/will), and

*an intentional object (what I think/fell/will)

Therefore, for Brentano psychology from a first person point of view implies that the most basic method of psychology is inner perception, i.e. the immediate awareness we have of our own mental acts as we perform them. E.g. When you see a man, you are also immediately aware that

² Huemer Wolfgang, *Is Brentano's Method a Unifying Element of the Brentano School?*

you are seeing. The awareness is also direct, infallible in its existence, and cannot be doubted. Hence inner perception is first-person by nature; no external observer has access to it.

Brentano's definition of mental phenomena by their intentional inexistence i.e. their being about something also supports his stand of psychology from a first-person point of view...the aboutness is accessible only from the first person standpoint. It is only the subject that can say - I am judging/imagining/ hoping that... A third-person observer may notice behaviour, but the intentional structure is known from within.

-His method also marks a breakthrough in research. He looked at phenomena from a different perspective from his predecessors.

-A novel school of thought could also spring from his new thought. Students as well as researchers interested in such novel ideas could carry it on, exploring it to greater dimension beyond its founder (dialectics at work). Consequently, it could move from the level of individual achievement to a collective enterprise.

*Brentano emphasized the role of memory and inner perception as sources of experience regarding an individuals' mental life. He underlined the role of an indirect knowledge of the mental phenomena of others, gained from manifest traits observed in others.³ It was a kind of introspectionist (inner perception and memory) psychology (of later 19th cent) replaced by the scientific psychology of the behaviorists that emphasized manifest behavior from a third person point of view.

BRENTANO'S MIND-BASED THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

"Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint" (1874)

This is Brentano's most important work that lays out the framework of his empirical psychology. In this work, he intends to achieve the following goals:

To define the nature and method of psychology.

To distinguish mental from physical phenomena.

And to identify the essential characteristic of the mental i.e. intentionality.

1 According to Brentano, psychology is the science of mental phenomena as experienced from within, through inner perception.

2 while physical phenomena concern external objects or events psychical or mental phenomena concerns inner experience.

The physical is observable through the senses while the mental is known through inner perception.

³ Franz Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, ed. Linda L. McAlister (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1874), 28.

The physical exist in space and time while the mental do not occupy space.

Instances of the physical include colour, sound, shape and that of the mental include seeing, believing, desiring.

For Brentano, only mental phenomena are immediately given to consciousness; physical things are known only indirectly, through mental acts - a set of rules that serve to organize internal and external sources of information/knowledge.

According to Brentano, knowledge is impressed on the mind. So, to understand the process of human knowledge, one has to understand the workings of the mind in the attainment of such knowledge. This links human knowledge to psychology pointing at Brentano's quest for a scientific psychology defined as "the science of mental phenomena."⁴ His epistemology reflects the influence of Aristotle and the Scholastics. (*Scholasticism is best known for its application in medieval Christian theology, especially in attempts to reconcile the philosophy of the ancient classical philosophers (particularly Aristotle) with Christian theology...Peter Abelard, Anselm of Canterbury etc.*)

Brentano was therefore set to show the workings of the human mind in our claim for the objectivity of knowledge given the external objects. Making a psychological enquiry into the field of epistemology, he proposed three criteria for distinguishing mental phenomenon from physical phenomenon:

- i mental phenomena are the exclusive object of inner perception
- ii they always appear as a unity and
- iii they are always intentionally directed towards an object

The above could be grouped under perception, judgement and intentionality. These come across as classifications of mental acts according to Brentano. Each of them has its own characteristic objects, but they all share the common feature of being intentional.

PERCEPTION

In psychology, perception refers to organizing, interpreting, and consciously experiencing sensory information. It encompasses our ability to see, hear, and become aware of our surroundings through our senses. Brentano's distinctive approach introduces the concept that every perception carries some error, known as "misception," thereby challenging the traditional notion of perception as error-free.

External perception is fraught with inaccuracies, yielding only hypotheses about the perceived world rather than actual knowledge. This perspective of perception suggests that natural sciences

⁴ Franz Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, ed. Linda L. McAlister (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1874), 14.

can only produce hypotheses rather than universal truths akin to those found in pure logic and mathematics.

In contrast, actual knowledge arises from internal perceptions. Brentano emphasizes the significant role of evidence in epistemology and posits that mental states are inherently accurate. In perceptual acts—such as seeing—the shape and colour of an object are considered physical phenomena, while the act itself is classified as a mental phenomenon. Consequently, inner perception is the reflexive consciousness of an act, marking the point at which we become aware of our mental objects (phenomena). Here, we can distinguish three levels of consciousness:

1. Any object that an act is directed toward is intentionally conscious, as the subject is aware of the object through the act.
2. The act itself is experienced consciously.
3. This same act can become the focus of an additional mental act, making the subject aware of the first-order mental act.

In Brentano's theory, both the first and last forms of consciousness are intentional. This indicates that the subject is aware of the object through the act, and the act itself is consciously experienced. However, there are doubts regarding the intentional nature of the second order of consciousness, which Brentano refers to as inner perception. Criticism...there is the possibility that *consciousness of* is not the sort of consciousness Brentano is looking for in the case at hand. It is not likely, at first glance, that a pain is conscious only by there being a higher order act, such as a thought, directed onto it. One does not need to think, wonder or fear that one is in pain in order to consciously experience pain. If Brentano is looking for this sort of experiential consciousness, then, having an act reflexively directed onto itself is of little help. The problem is that intentionality does not appear to capture the nature of the form of consciousness we are inquiring into.

True knowledge as opposed to opinion for Brentano comes from inner perception which he refers to as intentional “in-existence” of the object of perception (in the mind). It is a product of the mind. Here he underlines one’s self-consciousness of the act(s) as more reliable than the external objects.

Epistemic status of inner perception

How can inner perception give rise to infallible knowledge? Brentano believes that one can gain a sort of knowledge – *evidence* through inner perception. For him, evidence is more fundamental than belief. Therefore, the claim that all mental acts (pain, pleasure, sadness, happiness) are given to inner perception implies that one cannot be in pain without being consciously in pain. According to the philosopher Franz Brentano, mental acts are intentional experiences that involve the directedness of consciousness towards an object or contents of

thoughts. These acts are characterized by their intentionality, meaning their inherent aboutness or directedness towards something.

Brentano argued that mental acts are fundamental to our experience of the world and consciousness. He believed that mental acts provide the foundation for our understanding of various mental phenomena, such as perception, imagination, judgement, and emotion.

He differentiated between mental acts and their contents. The content represents the object of the mental act, while the act itself is the subjective experience of directedness towards the content. For example, when we perceive an object, the act of perception is directed towards the content or object of perception. Distinguishing between mental acts and physical phenomena, he argues that while physical phenomena can be observed, mental acts are only accessible through introspection.

Brentano's concept of mental acts has been influential in the philosophy of mind and contemporary cognitive science, as it emphasizes the active and intentional nature of mental processes. Mental acts play a crucial role in understanding human consciousness and the relationship between our thoughts and the external world.

So, the belief or consciousness of pain is a higher order of mental state, directed onto one's pain experience. Therefore, inner observation, and not inner perception, is required for one to gain knowledge about one's conscious experiences. But inner perception is a constitutive trait of all mental acts, for epistemic qualification. Evidence characterizes the mental states that are more connected to the truth. So, a mental state characterized with evidence is true in itself.

Judgement

The underlying factor in theories of judgement is the claim to synthesize i.e., to relate terms or concepts to each other. For Brentano, judgement is not limited to objects presented to the mind. They (objects presented through perception and imagination) can however, be the objects of judgement. Therefore, to make judgement of a given content of the mind, Brentano suggests we either accept or reject it without predication. Such contents of the mind are either physical and mental phenomena i.e., the way things or experiences impact on us. They must conform to reality. In a simple form, a judgement of inner perception is "simply the acceptance of the mental phenomenon presented in inner perception."

Intentionality

His legacy is notably defined by his concept of intentionality, a notion that continues to resonate in contemporary philosophical discourse.

For philosophers, intentionality signifies the mind's capacity to be directed toward something or to represent various things, properties, and states of affairs. It is the directedness of consciousness - the feature by which every mental act is about something. This perspective suggests that our mental states inherently contain content. For Brentano, asserting that thought is intentional means acknowledging that it is aimed at an intended object whether real or imagined. This means that all thoughts, emotions, perceptions, and other mental acts involve some sort of

relationship to an external object i.e. something outside of themselves. He posits that all psychological phenomena—and only psychological phenomena—are intentional. To believe, for instance, is to believe in something; a belief state, characterized as a specific mental act, is fundamentally about its intended target. For instance, if one is thinking about a tree, his or her thought is about that tree, but it has a thematic content that points to an external reality. The idea of intentionality gained prominence in the late 19th century as a significant philosophical movement.

When you perceive, you perceive something a tree, a sound etc.

When you desire, you desire something - a glass of water. Thus, every mental act contains within itself an intentional object - the thing it is directed toward. According to Brentano, every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself; although they do not all do so in the same way. Examples:

Mental Act = Seeing and the Intentional Object = The red apple

Mental Act = Remembering and the Intentional Object = The trip you took last year

Mental Act = Desiring and the Intentional Object = Your ordination

Mental Act = Judging and the Intentional Object = The Earth orbits the sun

His concept of intentionality was foundational for Husserl's phenomenology, Heidegger's existential analysis, and modern philosophy of mind.

In summary, intentionality implies that consciousness is always directed toward an object. This is the foundation of phenomenology.

*Inner perception = immediate awareness of one's own mental acts. It is the basis for descriptive psychology

*Empirical Psychology = this is philosophy grounded in experience. It forms the bridge for modern psychology.

**Distinction between genetic and descriptive psychology*

Genetic psychology studies psychological phenomena from a third-person point of view. It involves the use of experiments thereby satisfying the scientific standards expected of an empirical science today. On the other hand, Brentano's descriptive psychology (to which Brentano sometimes also referred as "phenomenology") aims at describing consciousness from a first-person point of view. Its goal is to show the basic components from which everything internally perceived by humans is composed, i.e. analyzing and describing the inner workings of mental acts. This approach emphasizes the importance of understanding the subjective experience of individuals, rather than focusing only on observable behavior. Furthermore, Brentano's descriptive psychology relies on:

- A. Inner perception as the source of data.
- B. Analysis and classification of mental acts.
- C. Intentionality as the defining mark of the mental.
- D. Empirical observation - this is not a kind of experiment as in natural sciences.

He wanted psychology to be empirical yet philosophical i.e. a careful observation of consciousness itself.

For Brentano, psychology should be descriptive, not experimental.

The philosopher's task is to describe the structures of experience as given in consciousness, not to explain them causally.

This idea paved the way for phenomenology, which developed directly from his method.

Limitations/Criticisms

1. Subjectivity: Critiques argue that perception as advocated by Brentano is too subjective to yield scientific results.
2. His empirical approach was descriptive, not experimental, limiting its predictive power.