# What is Brentano’s thesis? Is it true?

A pioneer in the philosophy-of-psychology, Franz Brentano wondered what it means to be a mind, and looked to develop an introspective, phenomenological understanding of consciousness. His Intentionality thesis states; (Crane, 1995) “every mental phenomenon includes something as an object within itself”. This claim was foundational to the discipline of Cognitive-Science remaining provocative today.

Brentano described Intentionality as the ‘mark of the mental’ separating believing, wanting, feeling, etc. from mere physical phenomenon. He argued, in any state of mind there is reference or direction towards an object within itself, often in some relationship to the physical world. This need not be something as concrete as an object or real entity.

Yet, there are many states of mind that don’t seem to exhibit intentionality. Feelings and sensations seem undirected, with no obvious reference to an object of mind. It’s possible to feel happy without knowing what you’re happy about. However, defenders might argue that you can be in reference to the self. Even so, there are elements or features within these experiences which don’t completely conform to Brentano’s characterisation.

Brentano’s championed introspective approach produces, in my opinion, his thesis’ strongest counter-example. Eastern philosophy, particularly Buddhism, possesses a much richer tradition of introspective practice. Many contemplatives prescribe that through wisdom and mindful practice you can train the mind to collapse the subject-object illusion separating mind and matter and transcend identifying as a self altogether; experiencing consciousness as a flow of sensations that belong to no-one. With no tangible object of reference and no self for sensation to be in reference to; Brentano’s mark of the mental is nowhere to be found.

The analogy of the mind as a computer has become commonplace. A computer can be defined as a causal mechanism which processes representations in a systematic way. Sound familiar? This has many hallmarks of the mind Brentano was explaining decades earlier. Critics worry this analogy is grasping to fill our largely incomplete understanding of the mind. However, I find it persuasive, the concept of a Turing machine theoretically suggests you could construct a mind from a computer. And although an unpractical, low-resolution description, recent developments in Artificial-Neural-Networks have made progress in areas like image recognition and language synthesis. This questions whether a compelling display of intentionality could be sufficient evidence of being a mind? Searles Chinese-room experiment considers this in the context of a black-box manipulating symbols to superficially communicate in Chinese, but without any ‘real’ understanding.

We owe a lot to Brentano, who’s Intentionality thesis was a first serious attempt to characterise mental phenomenon. The undirected qualia within feeing and sensation weaken his thesis and Meditative mind-states further so, though I think the extremity of this exception might go some way to supporting the general rule. The real test of his thesis will be if has anything to say about how we extend our definition of mind to incorporate artificial-intelligence. In the words of George Box; All models are wrong: some models are useful – and Brentano’s thesis seems just that.

Crane, T. (1995) The Mechanical Mind 2nd edition