

## Intentionality or consciousness?

### ABSTRACT

I discuss mainly three points in Fissette's target paper: 1) Is it true that consciousness is as fundamental – or even more fundamental – as intentionality is in Brentano's philosophy of mind? I shall try to show that intentionality comes first and sheds light on consciousness in Brentano's work of 1874; 2) I question the idea of self-consciousness as something intrinsic to a mental agent and irreducible to intentionality; 3) finally, is it possible to read Brentano as an intentionalist? I think it is, even if many intentionalists today would not accept Brentano's whole conception of the mind.

**Keywords:** Brentano; Philosophy of mind; Intentionality; Consciousness; Self-consciousness.

### RESUMO

Discuto aqui, principalmente, três pontos do artigo-alvo de Fissette, a saber: 1) É verdade que a consciência é tão fundamental - ou mesmo mais fundamental - que a intencionalidade na filosofia da mente de Brentano? Tento mostrar que a intencionalidade vem primeiro e elucida o papel da consciência no trabalho de Brentano de 1874; 2) questiono a idéia de auto-consciência como algo intrínseco ao agente mental e irreduzível à intencionalidade; 3) finalmente, é possível ler Brentano como um intencionalista? Acredito que sim, mesmo que muitos intencionalistas hoje não aceitariam inteiramente a concepção de mente de Brentano.

**Palavras-chave:** Brentano; Filosofia da mente; Intencionalidade; Consciência; Auto-consciência.

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Brentano's legacy is certainly among the most important and fascinating in contemporary philosophy. But the interpretation of his philosophical psychology is not always a piece of cake. The Devil lives in the ambiguities of some very important passages. Brentano himself was well aware of that, and his immediate followers as well.<sup>1</sup> Just to make things a little more complicated, there are also some important changes in his philosophical doctrines, especially in 1905 when he rejected his former view of content (an ontological thesis called "intentional in-existence" according to which intentional objects have a special ontological status for being immanent to the content of the state). Kotarbinski dubbed the emerging new doctrine "reism". (see KOTARBINSKI, 1976.) At that point, for Brentano, intentional objects are not anymore *immanent* to the intentional state; they transcend the state, and sometimes they exist, sometimes they don't. The new doctrine creates new problems of its own that could only be overcome with a new doctrine of content to be elaborated by Twardowski and Husserl. Be that as it may, the fact that we still have today new debates on Brentano's work, with people like Dan Zahavi, Uriah Kriegel, Tim Crane and Denis Fisette, should not come as a surprise.

Fisette's paper challenges the perception that most philosophers have of Brentano's philosophical psychology. By doing so, he gives us an opportunity to deepen some of our convictions or to revise them. Of course, any such challenge is always welcome. Just mention the name "Brentano" to anyone with some general philosophical knowledge, and the first word you are likely to hear is "intentionality". Usually, the common view does not go much farther than that. The rest of Brentano's complex philosophical psychology is largely unknown or seems irrelevant. Of course, this is not so. Fisette shows that there is much more to Brentano's philosophical psychology than intentionality. The theory of consciousness is certainly a case in point, and the same holds for the theory of the "mental agent" he shortly presents and puts in the forefront at the end of his paper. What Fisette does is not to deny the importance of intentionality in Brentano's philosophical psychology, but to suggest that we should ponder its importance in the light of other equally important principles and ideas. On that score, I totally agree.

In that short paper, I am not much interested in discussing Rosenthal's Higher Order Theory of consciousness and to compare it with Brentano's theory. I think Fisette has shown convincingly that Brentano gets the upper hand. I would like rather to discuss briefly the following issues raised by Fisette's rich interpretation: 1) Fisette presents some reasons showing that consciousness might be more fundamental in Brentano's psychology than intentionality. In foundational terms, I do not believe it is so. Intentionality seems to me more fundamental and still helps to understand "intransitive"

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<sup>1</sup> Namely, Twardowski and Husserl.

consciousness; 2) what does it mean to say that intransitive consciousness is an “intrinsic” property of a mental agent, irreducible to any relation of intentionality? And finally a minor point: 3) is there a possible intentionalist reading of Brentano’s work?<sup>2</sup>

1) I believe that intentionality in Brentano’s psychology remains in the central position: it is the mark of the mental, the main criterion we apply to decide if a phenomenon is mental or not. No “physical phenomenon” has it, he says. (By the way, Brentano is much more convincing in characterizing mental phenomena, his main concern, than physical phenomena; some examples he gives are quite strange: a landscape would be a physical phenomenon, and others, supposedly, take place in imagination.) Intentionality is the foundational concept, not only of Descriptive Psychology or Phenomenology, but also of Psychology and Philosophy of Mind. Intentionality, more than any other characteristic, is the very the essence of mental phenomena, which is not to say that they don’t have any other common characteristic. As a matter of fact, they have. Brentano mentions five such characteristics: 1) All mental phenomena contain intentionally an object in themselves to which they are directed (intentional in-existence); 2) All mental phenomena either are presentations or are based on presentations; 3) They are all given by/in inner perception; 4) They all have an effective existence in addition to intentional in-existence; and 5) They are all given as a unity of consciousness. The second characteristic is disjunctive; it separates all the mental phenomena into two classes instead of saying directly what these phenomena are. The third is very important for Brentano’s view of consciousness (more on this soon), but it tells something about the way mental phenomena are given or perceived, not about what they are. The fourth says that their existence cannot be put in doubt, while the existence of physical phenomena always can be; again, it does not tell us what mental phenomena are. And the last one tells us that, contrary to physical phenomena that appear separately or do not appear as parts of a single phenomenon, all mental phenomena appear “as in a unity” given in one single perspective of a conscious agent. It is always possible to distinguish abstractly parts in a mental phenomenon, but the parts are never separated when it is given in inner perception.

Brentano’s intention was to capture the essence of mental phenomena in order to distinguish them from physical phenomena. After asserting what is

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<sup>2</sup> Just a note before we get started: the way we look at “the problem of consciousness” today, especially when we think of the so-called “hard problem,” is very different from Brentano’s framework. To pose the same problem in Brentanian terms, we should also consider his Genetic Psychology which consider mental phenomena from a third-person point of view, and not only Descriptive Psychology, which describes mental phenomena from the first-person point of view. This is an important limitation and an important point to bear in mind in this whole discussion.

now known as the Brentano's Thesis (that intentional in-existence is the mark of mental phenomena and that no physical phenomena has it), Brentano declares: "We can, therefore, *define* mental phenomena by saying that they are those which contain an object intentionally within themselves." (BRENTANO, 1874, p. 75, my italics) But anyone of the five characteristics mentioned can serve to "define" mental phenomena in opposition to physical phenomena. However, if intentionality is not the only trait or characteristic common to all mental phenomena, it is the one that defines them better than any other, as he claims explicitly: "That feature which best characterizes mental phenomena is undoubtedly their intentional in-existence," (p. 75) that is, they all have, as their content, something represented to which they are "directed," not necessarily something existent. Using Locke's vocabulary, we could say that intentionality provides the real essence of mental phenomena; the other traits provide only nominal essences.

Brentano's introduction of Intentionality in 1874 puts together two ingredients that create confusions for his future interprets: directedness and intentional in-existence. The directedness, or mental reference to an object, is the more fundamental trait of intentionality. Brentano took three decades to discover the dead ends of the ontological thesis called "intentional in-existence". Around 1905, he criticized Marty and Meinong for their ontological exuberance and gave up the idea of a special ontological status for the things represented in the content of mental phenomena. Many men died in search of the Eldorado. But the Eldorado they imagined has no special ontological status. It simply never existed. But their thoughts were about a golden city and the content of these thoughts could not be specified in the sentence of a public language without mentioning the Eldorado *in modo obliquo*. In languages with declensions, like Latin, the nominative is the case of categorical reference. The other oblique cases suspend the categorical reference. "Plato's beard" refers to a special beard, not to Plato, "Plato" appearing only in the genitive case. The sentence "Sir Walter Raleigh imagines the Eldorado," specifies the content of a mental state ascribed to Walter Raleigh, and the intentional object is the Eldorado, but there is no categorical reference made to the golden city that appears as accusative (an oblique case) of the verb "imagining."

A stomachache (Fisette's example) is a specific kind of pain, and pain is a sensorial experience. Pain is also a paradigm case of conscious *mental* state. But are pains intentional? The stomachache I feel right now is about/of/directed at... what? Many philosophers think that pains are not intentional. John Searle, Louise Antony and Colin McGinn are regularly cited as members of a group that denies Brentano's thesis precisely for that reason. They take as granted or self-evident that pain, for instance, is not about something, is not directed at something, does not contain (or refer to) a represented object. But pain is certainly a mental phenomenon. Therefore, so the argument goes, intentionality

cannot be the mark of the mental and Brentano is wrong. The alternative would be to adopt consciousness as the mark of the mental, understanding consciousness in a “modal” way: something is mental if and only if it is conscious or *capable of being conscious* (“access consciousness” in Block’s terminology).

I think, like most intentionalists, that pains, orgasms, and sensorial experiences in general are intentional. When we are seeing, hearing, tasting, touching or smelling, we are tracking properties outside our bodies from non-conceptual contents “about” changes occurring inside our bodies. These changes we feel are intentional. They indicate something. They point at something. Brentano recognizes this point: “One thing certainly has to be admitted; the object to which a feeling refers is not always an external object.” “Still they [the feelings] retain a mental inexistence.” (BRENTANO, 1874, p. 69). The famous experience of the phantom limb confirms the fact that a sensorial experience, like the attitudes with conceptual content, can be about something that does not exist. Some people feel an itch in a hand they have lost for years. The itch indicates a localisation in a part of the body that does not exist anymore. Intentionality in Brentano characterizes not only attitudes with a conceptual content, but also conscious sensorial experiences. Fisette says at the end of his paper that we should discuss again the relation between intentionality and consciousness in Brentano’s work. I agree: it’s a nice program and we should do exactly that.

2) Is there anything like “intrinsic” or “intransitive” (KRIEGEL, 2003, p. 103-132)<sup>3</sup> consciousness in Brentano’s Psychology? These two adjectives, I think, might be a bit misleading in this context. *Grosso modo*, a property is intrinsic when its instantiation does not depend on anything but the object that instantiates it. To be made of gold, to have a determinate shape, to have a mass of 3 kilograms are intrinsic in this sense, but not to be married, to be a planet, or to be perceiving an orange. In the context of our discussion, I suppose that “intransitive” means not having a “direct object.” (I take it for granted that the relevant sense of the word here is the one it has in grammar, not in logic).

All mental phenomena are given in inner perception. And inner consciousness is the consciousness we have of our own mental phenomena. The knowledge we have of our own mental states is a special kind of knowledge that Anscombe once called “knowledge without observation.” That knowledge is immediate, infallible, and non-revisable. The whole and unique source of inner consciousness is inner perception. But inner perception clearly has an object. And *having an object*, as we saw, is something that has to do with intentionality.

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<sup>3</sup> Here Kriegel introduces the idea. My interpretation coincides with his: in Brentano, consciousness must be analyzed in terms of intentionality.

I am in the kitchen at midday, thinking and writing about some philosophical problem, when suddenly a blackout happens and only then I realize that the buzz of the refrigerator was there all the time. I perceived the difference only when the buzz stopped. Was I conscious of the buzz? I believe the right answer is “no,” and I also believe that this is what Brentano would say. To be conscious of something is to have an object. “We have seen that no mental phenomena exists which is not [...] consciousness of an object.” (p. 79).

Brentano says that conscious mental states have two objects: a primary object, the object to which the intentional state is directed, and a secondary object, the mental state itself. I think a relevant question in this discussion would be: Is there anything like a conscious mental phenomenon without a primary object? Brentano’s answer is clear when he considers the act of hearing:

A presentation of the sound without a presentation of the act of hearing would not be inconceivable, at least *a priori*, but the presentation of the act of hearing without a presentation of the sound would be an obvious contradiction. The act of hearing appears to be directed toward [the] sound in the most proper sense of the term, and because of this it seems to apprehend itself incidentally and as something additional. (p. 98)<sup>4</sup>

I wasn’t conscious of the buzz in the preceding example because it never was a primary object for me (or for anyone of my mental states at that time), but I became conscious of the interruption of the buzz, as we can be conscious of a shadow, a whole, a gap, a silence between two notes, etc. Chisholm, who was good at recycling medieval distinctions, would say that a primary object could be an *ens per alio* (whose identity depends on something else) as well as an *ens per se* (whose identity does not depend on something else).

If I am right in saying that there is no such thing as a mental phenomena without a primary object— and that includes, we have seen, sensorial presentations like stomachache —, the secondary object, the mental phenomenon itself, appears as an object too for inner perception. Why this could not be understood in terms of intentionality? If “having an object” is part of the *definiens* of what we call “intentionality,” there wouldn’t be nothing strange in doing so. There wouldn’t be self-consciousness (or intransitive consciousness) without a consciousness-of.<sup>5</sup> If we understand by “intrinsic” a quality that something can instantiate in isolation, whose instantiation does not depend on anything else, what exactly is intrinsic in Brentano’s theory of consciousness? It seems to me that Brentano’s descriptive psychology does not really separate intentionality and consciousness. But intentionality comes first in the logical succession of definitions.

<sup>4</sup> The word “the” in the quote is lacking in the translation.

<sup>5</sup> On that score, I agree with Kriegel’s interpretation (2003) that speaks of consciousness in terms of “self-directed intentionality.” This is mentioned in Fisette’s paper.

3) I believe that part of Brentano's thesis is essentially right. Intentionality is the mark of the mental. And like most "intentionalists" today, I believe it is true even of moods and sensorial experiences. Anything we characterize spontaneously as "mental" exhibits the property of "directedness", that is, they are "about" something, or "of" something. Brentano's thesis is logically stronger than that. It is the conjunction of two theses: 1) intentionality is the mark of the mental, *and* 2) physical phenomena don't exhibit such "aboutness".

The intentionalists defend only the first part of the so-called Brentano's thesis, that is, the intentionality is the mark of the mental, that all the mental acts, states and events are intentional, are about something, or directed to objects. (CRANE, 2014, p. 150)<sup>6</sup> Here "directedness" is the key word. The second part of the thesis says that no physical phenomena are intentional, or directed at something other than themselves. A matrusca doll is not *about* the other dolls it contains, anymore than a rope can be about a hanged man. Intentionalists are not committed to that second part of the thesis. Someone could claim consistently that all the mental is intentional, and nonetheless adopts a reductionist view of the mental as something physical. In that case, if "reducing mental properties" means "identifying them with lower-order properties," and given that identity is symmetric, part of the physical could be seen as intentional. However, this sounds bizarre, because only the mental *qua* mental is intentional. A bunch of neurons cannot be described as intentional. Some token-physicalists, like Davidson, would do exactly this: token-token identity means that part of living matter is mental (by symmetry of "="), but insist on conceptual dualism. There are many physical things that seem to be about something else. But they are not "autonomously" about something, so to speak. "Semanticity," the intentionality of linguistic expressions and other public representations (graphics, photographs, maps, etc.) presupposes the existence of agents capable of using them in a relevant way, and that clearly presupposes mentality. The artefacts, in general, have a proper function that can only be defined by mentioning the intentions, needs and desires of potential users. Smoke, footprints, symptoms, and similar examples of what Grice have called "natural meaning" do not seem to qualify as artefacts. They do not have a proper function and they depend on blind causal relations (fire causing smoke, etc.). Finally, George Molnar (2003) had the idea that physical dispositional properties *tend* to cause their manifestations and possess, therefore, a kind of physical intentionality. It brings some interesting advantages in philosophical psychology and ontology to extend intentionality beyond the realm of mentality; especially, it gives us a unifying view relative to the use of signs and of all sorts of artefacts. But for intentionalists, this is not a main concern.

<sup>6</sup> "For holding that all mental phenomena are intentional does not imply that nothing non-mental is."

Nonetheless, and once again, an intentionalist is committed only to the first part of Brentano's thesis: that intentionality is the mark of the mental. So Brentano could be seen, after all, as an intentionalist *plus* a denial of any form of intentionality in the realm of physical phenomena. In that sense, it is even a bit trivial to say that there is room in Brentano's works for an intentionalist interpretation. Fisetite seems to disagree with that.<sup>7</sup> Is it so unreasonable to attribute such a view to Brentano himself?

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<sup>7</sup> See the conclusion of Fisetite's paper: "... in spite of the significance of intentionality in his philosophy of mind, Brentano has never upheld any form of intentionalism whatsoever and has never attempted to reduce consciousness to any type of intentional relation."