

Brentano's concept of intentional inexistence

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Franz Brentano's attempt to distinguish mental from physical phenomena by employing the scholastic concept of *intentional inexistence* is often cited as re-introducing the concept of intentionality into mainstream philosophical discussion. But Brentano's own claims about intentional inexistence are much misunderstood. In the second half of the 20th century, analytical philosophers in particular have misread Brentano's views in misleading ways.¹ It is important to correct these misunderstandings if we are to come to a proper assessment of Brentano's worth as a philosopher and his position in the history of philosophy. Good corrections have been made in the recent analytic literature by David Bell (1990), Dermot Moran (1996), and Barry Smith (1994) among others.

But there is also another, more purely philosophical lesson to be learned from the proper understanding of Brentano's views on this matter. This is that Brentano's struggles with the concept of intentionality reveal a fundamental division between different ways of thinking about intentionality, a division which Brentano himself does not make fully clear. Making the nature of this division explicit is the aim of this paper.

¹ Two classic examples are Quine's remark that Brentano's thesis of the intentionality of the mental is the claim that 'there is no breaking out of the intentional vocabulary by explaining its members in other terms' (1960: 220); and Hartry Field's claim that Brentano thought it was impossible to give a 'materialistically adequate' account of the relation between a person and a proposition (1978: 78). Both Field and Quine link Brentano's thesis of the intentional inexistence of the mental with physicalism in the 20th century sense. But as we shall see, physicalism was not one of Brentano's concerns, and Field's and Quine's attributions bear little relation to what Brentano really said.

First I will attempt to expound Brentano's concept of intentional inexistence in its original 1874 context. This will enable us to eliminate some of the relatively superficial misunderstandings alluded to above. Then I will outline Brentano's change of mind when he later came to write the appendices to his 1874 *Psychology*. Although any reasonably careful reading of the text will show that Brentano did in fact change his mind, it is not always clearly recognised in the discussions of Brentano's thesis what it is that he changed it *from*. Third I will show how the tension between his earlier view and the later view of the appendices is in fact the tension which is responsible for the problem of intentionality as we have it today.

Intentional inexistence and nonexistence

Brentano is perhaps best known for the following passage:

Every mental phenomenon is characterised by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object, and what we might call, though not wholly unambiguously, reference to a content, direction towards an object (which is not to be understood here as meaning a thing) or immanent objectivity. Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself, although they do not all do so in the same way. In presentation, something is presented, in judgement something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired and so on. (1995: 88)

But what is this 'intentional inexistence'? One popular understanding of this phrase is that intentional inexistence has something to do with the possible or actual *non-*existence of objects of thought. We can think about objects which exist, and objects

which do not exist. But what makes it possible for us to think about things which do not exist? Some have claimed that this question was what motivated Brentano's whole theory of intentionality. According to Gabriel Segal, for example,

Brentano was particularly concerned with the problem of how we can represent things that don't exist outside of the mind, such as unicorns. His original idea was that if one thinks about a unicorn, then one's thought has an intentional object that does exist. The object is, not, however, a concrete inhabitant of external reality, but an ephemeral entity, existing in the mind only. (Segal forthcoming)

Segal's claim is that Brentano introduced 'intentional objects' to solve the problem of how we can think about objects which do not exist, like unicorns. Brentano's solution, on this understanding, was to say that the object of thought in this case is not something in 'external reality' but something in the mind only. Hence every thought has an object, it's just that the objects of thoughts about non-existent entities are mental objects. And according to Segal, this is true of thought about existent entities too: 'Brentano held that the objects of thought and experience were always such intentional entities. Thus if one is thinking about Paris, the immediate object of one's thought is an intentional object rather than a city' (Segal, forthcoming).

The idea that the objects of thought about the non-existent are mental objects – for this is how I will understand objects as 'existing in the mind only' – is a view which is often discussed in connection with the problem of non-existence. There are obvious and well-known objections to the view (see Harman 1990). But I will not dwell on these objections here, since I want to examine instead on the line of thought behind Segal's interpretation of Brentano, since it is an interpretation which is

frequently found in analytic philosophy. Segal seems to think that the thesis that objects of thought (intentional objects) are mental is a solution to the problem of non-existent objects of thought. The idea is this: how do we think about Pegasus? Answer: we do this by having in mind an ephemeral or mental entity; hence what we are thinking about is an ephemeral or mental entity. This suggests that if we were just considering the phenomenon of thought about what we normally take to be *existing* entities, then we would not have any reason to say that objects of thought are mental. A clear implication of Segal's view is that we would have no inclination to think that an object of thought is mental if it were itself a real or existing object: say, the Darley Arabian rather than Pegasus.

But whatever the merits of this approach to the problem of non-existence, it cannot be Brentano's 1874 view. The reason is that his original introduction of the terminology of intentional inexistence in the 1874 book does not appeal to, and nor does it presuppose, any distinction between existent and non-existent objects of thought at all. So the reason for introducing the idea of intentional inexistence can hardly have been because of any problem presented by non-existent objects like Pegasus. This is not, however, because Brentano thinks that all objects of thought exist. Rather, it is closer to the truth to say that he thinks *none* of them exist, not even the things we take to be ordinary physical objects. To a contemporary ear, this is a rather paradoxical or nihilistic way to put the view; it would be closer to the truth to say that none of the things we take to be ordinary physical things have any kind of ultimate or transcendent reality. At the beginning of his *Psychology* of 1874, Brentano discusses physical phenomena, the subject-matter of physical or natural science. He writes:

The phenomena of light, sound, heat, spatial location and locomotion which [the natural scientist] studies are not things which really truly and exist. They are signs of something real, which, through its causal activity, produces presentations of them. They are not, however, an adequate representation of this reality, and they give us knowledge of it only in a very incomplete sense. We can say that there exists something which, under certain conditions, causes this or that sensation. We can probably also prove that there must be relations among these realities similar to those which are manifested by spatial phenomena of shapes and sizes. But this is as far as we can go. We have no experience of that which truly exists, in and of itself, and that which we do experience is not true. The truth of physical phenomena is, as they say, only a relative truth. (Brentano 1995: 19)

It is clear from this passage that Brentano's view is not that there is a distinction between 'physical objects' which exist, and 'intentional objects' which do not exist. His view is rather that none of the things which are studied by science 'really and truly exist': they are phenomena, mere appearances, which are signs of an underlying reality but which are not real themselves. Since all objects of natural scientific investigation are phenomena, then they all have the same status *vis-à-vis* reality: none of them are real. But this is not because they are unreal in the way we think Pegasus is; rather it is because they are only *phenomena*. So Brentano did not begin with the problem that Segal says he did.

Segal sets up the problem against the background of a kind of 20th and 21st century 'commonsense' realism which assumes that there is a realm of ordinary objects which exist independently of our minds, that relations hold between such

objects, and that things cannot be more or less real. Given these assumptions, then the problem of intentionality can be posed as follows: how can a non-existent entity like Pegasus be the object of an act of thought, since it cannot be something which stands in relation to the subject of a mental act, because anything which stands in a relation to anything else must exist. Clearly the assumption that something can only stand in a relation to something which exists is one of the assumptions which form part of the metaphysical background of contemporary realism. Now I am not disputing these assumptions; in fact, like many analytic philosophers, I accept them. My point here is that they cannot be Brentano's assumptions, and so the problem which Segal says Brentano is addressing cannot really be his problem.² And neither, therefore, does Brentano encounter the problem with the view – that intentional objects are mental objects – which Segal then goes on to claim he does:

One's thought is true if there is a match of the right kind between the properties of the intentional object and those of the real object. An obvious problem with this view is that it offers no account of what determines the real object of thought (Paris), and hence leaves the nature of intentionality mysterious. Brentano himself came to realise this and abandoned the doctrine. (Segal forthcoming)

The problem presented here is like a version of the 'veil of perception' objection to the sense-data theory: if all we have access to are the immediate objects of perception, then how does our perceptual experience ever reach out to (what we really know to

² Cf. Barry Smith: 'one will find no coherent interpretation of Brentano's principle of intentionality so long as one remains within the framework of our usual, commonsensical notions of both the mind and its objects.' (1994: 40)

be) the real objects of perception? But given that Brentano thinks that we have little conception of ‘that which truly exists, in and of itself’, and that science’s job is simply to account for the data of experience, then this problem does not arise for him, in the case of perception or in the case of thought. In other words, since Paris, too, is simply a phenomenon, the question of what determines Paris as the ‘real object of thought’ makes no literal sense for him.

Segal is right, however, that Brentano later abandoned his 1874 view of intentionality; we shall look into this below. But the present issue is what Brentano’s earlier views actually were. I have claimed that these views involve assumptions which would be rejected by many analytic philosophers today: that phenomena are not real in themselves but only signs of a fundamentally unknowable independent reality; and that some things are, in a certain way, more real than others. Hence philosophers today cannot accept Brentano’s views, and in a sense these views are invisible to them. If our aim is simply to get clear about the facts of intentionality then this doesn’t matter very much. But if we are going to make claims about what *Brentano’s* views actually were, and what therefore is alive or dead in them, then we have to see what his assumptions were, rather than ignoring them or translating them into our terminology which disguises distinctions which he might have made.

However, we have not yet said what Brentano actually meant by ‘intentional existence’. This is the task of the next section.

Intentional inexistence

To understand properly the concept of intentional inexistence, we have to set the famous passage in the context of the general project of the *Psychology*. The overall aim of the book was to establish the intellectual foundations of psychology as a

science. It is a science whose data comes from experience and introspection – hence it is psychology from an *empirical* standpoint.³ He thought that if psychology was to be established as a science, there has to be a criterion which distinguishes its subject-matter from the subject-matter of physical or natural science. In Book One of the *Psychology* Brentano had defined psychology as the ‘science of mental phenomena’, opposing the etymologically more correct definition of it as the ‘science of the soul’. Before we examine what makes a phenomenon mental, we should say something about this use of the terms ‘phenomenon’ and ‘science’.

These two terms should really be understood together. As we have seen, Brentano believed that natural science does not uncover the real nature of things. In particular, physics is not the science of bodies because even if we can be said to encounter the properties of bodies, ‘we never encounter that something of which these things are properties’ (1995: 11). All that science can ever discover are the appearances of things: these are the ‘physical phenomena’ like ‘light, sound, heat, spatial location and locomotion’. Science studies phenomena; that is all that science can do. These phenomena or appearances are things which only exist in the mind. As Barry Smith puts it:

at the time of the first edition of the *Psychology* Brentano conceives physical phenomena like experienced colours and sounds as existing in the mind as parts of consciousness, so that the intentionality of outer perception is in fact a

³ Note the difference between this use of ‘empirical’ and the contemporary conception of psychology as an empirical science. From a contemporary perspective, to say that psychology is an empirical science is to say that it uses the kinds of methods (e.g. quantitative or statistical methods) which are characteristic of the other natural sciences. From that perspective, Brentano’s introspective psychology is no more empirical than William James’s. I ignore here the later distinction Brentano makes between descriptive and genetic psychology; but see Brentano 1890, in the useful edition by Benito Mueller.

relation between two mental entities, the (real) act of sensation and the (non-real, non-causally efficacious, abstract) quality sensed. The latter, for example experienced sounds and colours, have a diminished sort of existence, an existence 'in the mind'. (Smith 1994: 41)

Physical phenomena are the objects of experiences; but physical phenomena are appearances. Appearances are fundamentally mind-dependent (*pace*, for example, Morrison 1970). So Segal is quite right to say that according to Brentano's 1874 view, intentional objects only exist in the mind. But Brentano did not think this because he was trying to solve the problem of non-existence. Rather, it is simply a consequence of the fact that sciences study phenomena.

It is easy to see, then, that the differences between sciences amount to the differences between the phenomena studied by the sciences. The distinction between psychology and physics therefore amounts to the distinction between mental and physical phenomena. But it is crucial for understanding Brentano's *Psychology* that this distinction is a distinction among the 'data of consciousness' (1995: 77). Brentano talks approvingly of Lange's idea of 'psychology without a soul' (1995: 11). What he has in mind here is that psychology can proceed while being indifferent on the question of whether there is a soul: for 'whether or not there are souls, there are mental phenomena' (1995: 18). So what, then, are mental phenomena?

This brings us back to the famous definition quoted above. A mental phenomenon (or a mental 'act' in Brentano's terminology) always contains an object within itself. The 'directedness towards an object', 'relation to a content' or 'immanent objectivity' all therefore amount to the same thing: there is an object – that is, another phenomenon, whether physical or mental – in the mental act itself. All

mental phenomena are directed upon phenomena, and such phenomena may be physical or mental. In the former case, a mental act would have as its object something like a sound or a shape or a colour. In the latter case, a mental act would have as its object another mental act. For example, one may think about the mental act of *hearing* a sound, for example. But whether physical or mental, the objects of acts are phenomena and hence fundamentally mind-dependent. Hence Brentano was not proposing how we think about mind-independent ‘external’ objects. The intentional inexistence of an object means, literally, existence *in* the mental act itself. As Smith comments, the thesis that ‘every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself’ is ‘to be taken literally - against the grain of a seemingly unshakeable tendency to twist Brentano’s words at this point’ (Smith, 1994: 40; see further Jaquette 2004).

The background to this view is partly Aristotelian, as Brentano indicates in a well-known footnote (1995: 88). Aristotle had talked in the *De Anima* about how in perception, the perceiving organ takes on the ‘form’ of the perceived object: in seeing something blue, the eye takes on blueness without taking on the matter of blueness (see Sorabji 1991; though see Caston 1998 for further discussion). Brentano, like Aquinas, wanted to follow Aristotle in at least this respect: the proper objects of thought and perception – what it is that we are thinking of, and what makes thought possible at all – are actually *immanent* in the act of thinking, and do not transcend the mental act. In this respect, objects of thought may be compared to universals on an Aristotelian conception of them, according to which they are immanent in the particulars which instantiate them, and do not transcend those particulars.

Finally, I should briefly mention the fact that Brentano divides mental phenomena into three kinds: presentation, judgement and emotional phenomena

including love, hate and desire. A presentation (*Vorstellung*, sometimes translated as ‘idea’ or ‘thought’) may be inner or outer. An inner presentation may be a feeling or an awareness of some mental act; the objects of inner perception are thinking, feeling and willing. The objects of outer presentation or perception are warmth, colour, sound and so on (i.e. physical phenomena). A distinctive feature of his view is that every mental act is also directed on itself (although in what he called a ‘secondary’ sense) as well as on its primary object.⁴ Much of Book II of the *Psychology* is concerned with articulating the distinction between the three kinds of mental phenomena (see Mulligan 2004 for a recent discussion). In the 1874 book, Brentano held that presentations never occur alone but only together with some other mental activity (judgement or love/hate) but he later came to abandon this view, as he acknowledged in the 1911 edition of selections from the *Psychology* (1995: 276).

Methodological phenomenism

The picture of Brentano’s 1874 views which we have arrived at is in some ways foreign to contemporary discussions of intentionality, which tend to assume a commonsense realism about the material world, and a physicalist conception of the findings of science. But, placed in wider context, the views should not be so strange. For Brentano’s conception of science has a lot in common with the kind of phenomenism which was common in 19th century philosophy of science, which survived into the 20th century in logical positivism, and which has echoes in Quine’s claim that the purpose of science is to explain and predict the course of experience.⁵ At the beginning of the *Psychology*, Brentano mentions Mill approvingly as ‘one of

⁴ This is a part of Brentano’s view which has been taken up recently in some discussions of consciousness; see Thomassen 2000 and Hossack 2002.

⁵ See Quine (1960: chapter 1) and see also (e.g.) Poincare (1914: 14), for phenomenism about science in the early 20th century.

the most important advocates of psychology as a purely phenomenalist science' (1874: 14), and although not a card-carrying phenomenalist himself, he expressed sympathy with Ernst Mach's phenomenism on a number of occasions (cf. Smith 1994: 41, n.8).

But Brentano was not a phenomenalist because phenomenism holds that the world is constructed from phenomena, appearances or (in some versions) sense-data. And as we saw above, Brentano holds that there is a world which transcends the phenomena; physical phenomena are 'signs of something real, which, through its causal activity, produces presentations of them' (1995: 19). This is what distinguishes Brentano from phenomenism proper: he believes that there is something beyond the phenomena, although we can never know it. Nonetheless, this knowledge can never come through science; so as far as science is concerned, phenomenism might as well be true. Peter Simons has usefully called Brentano's approach *methodological phenomenism* (Simons 1995: xvii) and I will adopt this label.

One obstacle for Anglophone readers to seeing the importance of Brentano's sympathy with phenomenism is the complex and somewhat messy text which was eventually published as *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* in 1973.⁶ The text as it has come down to us is larded with footnotes by Brentano's editor Oskar Kraus, many of them substantive and interpretative in nature, and a less than careful reader might be misled into thinking that some of them are actually Brentano's own. After the passage on page 19 of the 1874 work, which I quoted above in full and which is central to understanding Brentano's methodological phenomenism, Kraus adds a

⁶ The English translation of the *Psychology* is by A. Rancurello, D.B. Terrell & L.L. McAlister, published by Routledge & Kegan Paul in 1973; the paperback edition was published by Routledge in 1995. This is essentially a reprint of the 1973 text with an excellent introduction by Peter Simons. However, Kraus's intrusive and misleading notes remain in this edition, a fact for which I must bear some responsibility, as one of the editors of the series in which the reprint book appeared.

note saying that this passage is ‘misleading’ because it does not distinguish light from colour, and sound from the heard sound. But Brentano can easily distinguish light from colour and still say that light is a phenomenon, that is, not something which really and truly exists and that it is still among the things which physics studies. Brentano’s methodological phenomenalism is not simply a belief in the existence of secondary qualities. Moreover, immediately after this passage, Brentano contrasts the ‘relative truth’ of physical phenomena with the phenomena of inner perception (or introspection) which are ‘true in themselves. As they appear to be, so are they in reality’. This is why he says that the phenomena psychology studies are ‘true and real in themselves’ (1995: 20). What Brentano is talking about here is ‘inner perception’: when a mental act is presented as the object of another mental act there is no further ‘external’ reality to which it corresponds. This is the kind of point that contemporary philosophers might express by saying that where consciousness is concerned, the ‘appearance is the reality’.⁷ Kraus adds a footnote at this point saying that this does not mean that Brentano is a phenomenalist. Of course, it does not; but in his care to avoid casting Brentano as a phenomenalist, Kraus goes too far the other way, and tries to present him as if he were (in the 1874 edition) a realist about the physical world: ‘in Brentano’s opinion, the physicist, too, is concerned with “things which are true and real in themselves”’ (1995: 20). But not only does this not follow from the denial of phenomenalism, it is also inconsistent with other things Brentano says in the 1874 text. One could deny phenomenalism and still think that physics only studies phenomena, but phenomena which are the result of an underlying reality which we cannot fully know. And this seems to be Brentano’s actual view, clearly and un-misleadingly expressed in the passage from page 19 quoted above. As he says later,

⁷ For classic discussions, see Nagel 1974, Kripke 1980, lecture III.

‘what are physical phenomena if not the colours, sounds, heat and cold etc., *which manifest themselves in our sensations?*’ (1995: 69, emphasis added).

We are now in a position to take something of an overview of the doctrine of intentional inexistence. The distinction between mental and physical phenomena is that while both kinds of phenomena are among the ‘data of consciousness’, only mental phenomena are directed upon something else as an object. But this object too is only a phenomenon. So what happens when someone hears a sound is that there is a mental act (a mental phenomenon: in this case, a presentation) which is directed upon a physical phenomenon (a sound). This is an act of outer perception. In acts of inner perception, a mental act is directed upon another mental phenomenon. But there is no distinction between those phenomena – the objects of mental acts – which exist and those which do not. This is because, according to methodological phenomenism, science can only study phenomena. Physical phenomena do not exist, in the sense in which their underlying causes exist – they ‘should not be considered a reality’ – but nor should they be thought of as unreal or non-existent, like Pegasus. From the point of view of consciousness, they are there, given to consciousness and there to be studied, like the mental phenomena whose objects they are.

Hence there is no issue, from the perspective of methodological phenomenism, about ‘objects of thought which do not exist’. All objects of thought or presentation are in this way intentionally ‘inexistent’ in some mental act or other, and this is all that can be studied in psychology. The reality or non-reality of the causes of these phenomena is beyond scientific investigation: psychology as an empirical science can only study the data of consciousness.

The conclusion I want to draw from this account of Brentano’s theory of intentionality is therefore quite simple: Brentano’s original 1874 doctrine of

intentional inexistence *has nothing to do with the problem of how we can think about things that do not exist*. Although his account of intentionality would certainly supply an account of thought about, say, Pegasus, this is only because it is an account of thought *in general*, and not because that was what was motivating the account.

But if this is true, then an interesting exegetical question remains: why have so many philosophers taken Brentano to be concerned with this question in his 1874 definition of mental phenomena? To point to a verbal similarity between ‘inexistence’ and ‘nonexistence’ is surely not sufficient; more charity is needed if we are to untangle this mess of ideas. In the next section I will answer this question, and point out a general moral.

Brentano’s change of mind

Those who are familiar with Brentano’s work only through those passages which are quoted by analytic philosophers of intentionality might be puzzled by what has been said so far. For in addition to the famous definition of mental phenomena discussed above, there are other often-quoted pieces of Brentano’s text which seem to contradict what I have said. Consider, for example, these passages from the 1973/1995 English edition of the *Psychology*:

What is characteristic of every mental activity is, as I believe I have shown, the reference to something as an object. In this respect, every mental activity seems to be something relational.... If I take something relative from among the broad class of comparative relations, something larger or smaller for example, then, if the larger thing exists, the smaller one must exist too. If one house is larger than another house, the other house must also exist and have a size.... It is entirely

different with mental reference. If someone thinks of something, the one who is thinking must certainly exist, but the object of his thinking need not exist at all.... For this reason, one could doubt whether we are really dealing with something relational here, and not, rather, with something somewhat similar to something relational in a certain respect, which might therefore be called 'quasi-relational'. (1995: 272)

And later he writes:

All mental references refer to things.

In many cases, the things to which we refer do not exist. But we are accustomed to saying that they then have being as objects. This is a loose use of the verb 'to be' which we permit with impunity for the sake of convenience, just as we allow ourselves to speak of the sun 'rising' and 'setting'. All it means is that a mentally active subject is referring to those things. It is only consistent to go on and permit such statements as 'A centaur is half man, half horse' although in the strict sense centaurs do not exist and so, in a strict sense, there is no centaur which has a body that is half of human form and half in the form of a horse. (1995: 291)

These passages seem to be in simple opposition to the interpretation of Brentano's views which I have advanced in the previous sections of this paper. For Brentano here seems to be expressing the problem of intentionality in the way that contemporary analytic philosophers do (see, e.g. Stalnaker 1983: chapter 1): thinking about something appears to be a relation between the thinker and the thing thought about;

but relations entail the existence of their relata; yet we can think about things which do not exist. Yet everything that I have been trying to say so far has been dedicated to showing that this was not Brentano's concern. So how can my interpretation of Brentano be correct?

The answer to this question, of course, is that Brentano changed his mind – as all those familiar with the *Psychology* will know. In 1911 chapters 5-9 of Book II of the 1874 edition were re-printed, under the title, *On the Classification of Mental and Phenomena*. To this were added, as an appendix, several 'supplementary remarks' from which the above quotations above are taken. In the Preface to this 1911 edition, describing the ways in which his views had evolved, Brentano wrote that 'one of the most important innovations is that I am no longer of the opinion that mental relation can have something other than a thing as its object' (1995: xxvi). To describe this as an 'innovation', however, is at worst misleading and at best an understatement. For the whole account of intentionality in the 1874 work was based on the idea of intentional inexistence, which is unproblematic only to the extent that objects of thought are immanent to the act of thinking. As we saw, this fits smoothly into a view of all science and its subject-matter: science does not treat of the real, but only of phenomena, which we have some reason to think is a causal effect of an underlying reality whose character we do not fully understand. Once it is admitted that objects of thought can be themselves *real things*, and therefore transcend the act of thought, then this whole picture starts to fall apart. Seen in this context, Brentano's description of his 'innovation' – that the mental relation cannot have anything 'other than a thing as its object' – is somewhat disingenuous, for it strongly suggests that he used to think that the mental relation *could* sometimes have a real thing as its object, and sometimes

something else. But as we saw above, he did not think this when he wrote the 1874 work; indeed, if I am right, he *could not* have thought this.

The situation is not helped by the fact that in 1924 a second edition, edited by Oskar Kraus, was published, with the addition of Kraus's explanatory notes discussed above, and some extra essays. This is the edition which was then translated almost in its entirety in 1973, under the editorship of Linda L. McAlister. A reader interested chiefly in the philosophical content, and inattentive to the way Brentano's work has been served up to Anglophone readers, might be forgiven for thinking that Brentano's concept of intentional existence is both more obscure than it actually is, and also motivated by the problem of intentionality as we have it today. Or, to put it slightly differently: even if such a casual reading of a text is unforgivable, it is certainly understandable.

Conclusion: the problem of intentionality

According to many scholars, Brentano changed his mind under pressure from some of his students, who argued that objects of thought must transcend the act of thinking (see e.g. Smith 1994: 54; Moran 2000: chapter 2). Kasimir Twardowski, for instance, argued that a distinction is needed between the object of a thought and its content, where it is the *content* which is something immanent to the thought. Alexius Meinong, on the other hand, thought that the realm of objects should include objects of all kinds including non-existent and impossible objects. And of course, in one of the most famous and influential discussions of Brentano's doctrine of intentional inexistence, Husserl argued that objects of thought are always transcendent (Husserl 1901; see also Føllesdal 1978). When a thought concerns a non-existent object, then we should say that there is no object at all to which the subject is related; there is only

an act of thought with a certain intentional ‘matter’ (or was would be said today, intentional content). Though his thought later took an idealist turn, Husserl was never a phenomenalist, and nor was he a methodological phenomenalist as Brentano was. In his discussions of intentionality in the earlier work, Husserl was very clear that the object of thought was not immanent in the thought, and that therefore intentionality should not be conceived as a relation to its objects (see Zahavi 1998).

Brentano’s later discussions of intentionality, which entail the rejection of methodological phenomenism, do not approach anywhere close to the sophistication of Husserl’s. Indeed, it is hard to see that they do more than state the problem. Calling something a ‘quasi-relation’ (*Relativliches*) without further explanation does little but draw attention to the phenomenon we are trying to understand. But nonetheless, we can see that with the move away from methodological phenomenism, Brentano is facing up to the problem of intentionality as we conceive of it today. This problem is pretty much invisible as long as we stay within the framework of methodological phenomenism. If one is a methodological phenomenist, one construes intentional relations as relations to phenomena, which are mental or mind-dependent. Since every intentional mental act is a relation to *some* phenomenon or other, then there simply is no issue about the non-existence, or the possible non-existence of objects of thought. So, in that sense, there is no problem of intentionality. But once one moves beyond the methodological phenomenist framework – as Brentano did when he adopted his ‘innovation’ – one has to say something about what it is that characterises your thought when the object of thought does not exist. This simply is the problem of intentionality for anyone who accepts the minimal ‘realist’ assumptions that there is a mind-independent realm of objects, our thought can concern them, and moreover, that the way they concern these mind-independent objects is what distinguishes thoughts

from one another. These assumptions easily generate the conception of thought as relational – as a relation to its objects – which, together with the metaphysical assumption that relations entail the existence of their relata, give us our problem. In this way, we can see how Brentano's move away from the doctrine of intentional inexistence, and towards the embracing of transcendent objects of thought, dramatises within his philosophy the problem of intentionality itself.

Nonetheless, it has to be admitted that the conclusion to which we are leading is a somewhat negative one: that it is hard to see Brentano's discussions of intentionality as something which we can interact usefully with today in any depth. The concept of intentional inexistence as introduced in the 1874 *Psychology* presupposes a metaphysical and epistemological framework in which the idea of an intentional relation certainly made sense, but few would accept this framework today and it was rejected by Brentano himself (in the guise of an innovation) in the 1911 edition. Once this framework is rejected, then as Husserl saw, there is no real place for an intentional relation at all, and Brentano's concept of intentional inexistence is not one which is profitably employed in discussions of intentionality.⁸

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