

Brentano's Project of Descriptive Psychology

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Brentano's most famous work, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, published in 1874, was primarily concerned with epistemology.¹ Its central aim was to present new foundations for scientific, i.e., empirical, psychology. As such, Brentano's project in the *Psychology* cannot be dissociated from the broader context of the birth and development of empirical psychology around the mid-nineteenth century, by philosophers such as Hamilton (1859), Lotze (1852), Fechner (1860), Wundt (1874), and the British associationists.

For Brentano, an "empirical" science is a "purely phenomenal science" (*ausschliesslich phänomenale Wissenschaft*) (Brentano 1874: 20/1973a: 14) — a science whose objects are not substances, but phenomena. Empirical natural science should not be viewed as the science of physical substances, namely of bodies, but as the "science of physical phenomena". Likewise, empirical psychology is not the science of mental substances, namely souls, but the "science of mental phenomena" (Brentano 1874: 13, 16/1973a: 9, 11). The idea is that science in general can, and should, dispense with the metaphysical assumption that there *are* substances which underlie the phenomena we witness. Thus, as indicated in the title of a 1888-9 lecture course, descriptive psychology is best seen as a "descriptive phenomenology" (Brentano 1982: 129/ 1995b: 137).²

Applied to psychology, Brentano's empiricist claim is that psychological knowledge refers to phenomena and only to phenomena. Put otherwise: it must have its source in perceptual experience. However, the descriptive psychologist is not concerned (at least primarily) with any phenomena whatsoever, her objects are specifically mental phenomena, namely objects of inner perception. In consequence, "inner perception of our own mental phenomena", that is, consciousness, "is the primary source of the experiences essential to psychological investigations" (Brentano 1874: 48/1973a: 34; see also Brentano 1874: 40-41/1973a: 29).

We should not be misled, however, into regarding Brentano's program of descriptive psychology merely as a reaction against physiological psychology in the style of Fechner and Wundt. In his lectures of 1887-8, he considers both descriptive and physiological psychology to be branches of psychology in general (Brentano 1982: 1ff., 10ff., 154ff./1995b: 3ff., 13ff.,

163ff.). The former is a purely psychological science aimed at classifying mental phenomena into types and analyzing them into their elements and structural relations (compatibility, separability, etc.). The latter, which Brentano also terms “genetic psychology”, deals with the development over time and causal conditions of inner life — which requires reference to physiological processes. But although the Brentanian program leaves room for genetic psychology, descriptive psychology can be seen, to some extent, as a foundation for it: descriptive psychology is independent of genetic psychology, and provides conceptual distinctions that are presupposed by genetic psychology (Brentano 1982: 156/1995b: 165). This stands to reason: the purpose of genetic psychology is to offer a causal explanation of mental phenomena, but before we can do so we must know what the phenomena are which need explanation; it is the purpose of descriptive psychology to *describe* mental phenomena, the phenomena genetic psychology is to explain. The distinction between descriptive and genetic psychology, which is central to Brentano’s epistemology of psychology, will be detailed in §4.

Another point of importance is that, despite his radical empiricism, Brentano held the laws of descriptive psychology to be a priori laws. As will be explained in §4, Brentano saw no contradiction between his empiricism and the idea of a psychological a priori. This is certainly one of the most interesting and fruitful aspects of Brentano’s descriptive psychology in the context of recent epistemological debates.³

1. Introspection

Like most of his contemporaries, including a number of experimental psychologists, Brentano thought that the method of psychology must involve introspection, that is, self-observation of one’s own inner life. Mental phenomena, like physical phenomena, can be objects of observation and knowledge. But on the other hand, Brentano draws a sharp distinction between introspection and consciousness or inner perception (Feest 2014: 699-700). To observe oneself seeing a coffee mug is not merely to consciously see the mug, it requires an attentional shift from the seen mug to the seeing itself, that is, from the “primary object” of the act to its “secondary object” (Brentano 1874: 176ff./1973a: 126ff.).

That being so, couldn’t self-observation, at least in some cases, be a new inner perception, numerically distinct from mere consciousness? Brentano thought otherwise. Introspection, he claims, is possible only in the mode of memory (Brentano 1874: 48ff./1973a: 34ff.). It does not present one’s mental acts as present, as inner perception does, but as past mental acts. Brentano’s example is well known: you cannot both feel angry and reflect on your anger at

the same time, simply because reflection alters your anger or even may cause you to cease to feel angry (Brentano 1874: 41/1973a: 30). At the moment when you have an introspective representation of your own mental act, your mental act no longer exists. Thus, psychological observation must be different from inner perception. What the psychologist innerly perceives when she introspects her mental act *A* is not *A*, but her act of remembering *A*.

One important consequence of this is that psychological knowledge, unlike inner perception (Brentano 1874: 128/1973a: 91), is subject to self-deception, doubt, and uncertainty (Brentano 1874: 49-50/1973a: 35). It would be absurd to doubt the existence of your feeling angry at the very moment you feel angry. But you can certainly be wrong in attributing to yourself a past feeling. Furthermore, psychological knowledge is also made fallible by the fact that obviously it must also deal with other subjects' experiences, to which the psychologist has no immediate access. Brentano thus attaches major significance to studying the mental life of children, members of non-Western civilizations ("primitives"), born-blinds, non-human animals, mental patients, great personalities, and the like — mental life which is normally cognoscible only through outer observation of verbal reports, bodily responses, voluntary or involuntary behavior, etc.

To sum up: outer observation and inner observation through memory are "sources" of psychological knowledge. However, the former presupposes the latter, which in turn presupposes inner perception: attributing a feeling of anger to another person means attributing to her a feeling similar to the anger you previously felt and now remember. Therefore, "inner perception constitutes the ultimate and indispensable precondition of the other two sources of knowledge" (Brentano 1874: 61/1973a: 43).

2. Analysis

The method of Brentano's descriptive psychology is a combination of introspection and analysis. First, the object of psychology is the flow of consciousness, thus something that is experienced in the first person. Secondly, Brentano adheres to a compositional view of mental life. On this view, the flow of consciousness is a whole composed of often separable parts. The descriptive psychologist's task is to analyze the whole into its separable parts, the most basic of which are supposed to correspond to primitive concepts. On the one hand, the descriptive psychologist analyzes experiences into their elements; on the other hand, she classifies them under basic concepts. For example, your aesthetic experience of a piece of music is a compound of an auditory presentation and a feeling of pleasure.

Brentano's intentionality thesis — "... is a mental phenomenon" is necessarily equivalent to "... is intentional" — may be construed in terms of such analysis or decomposition (Brentano 1982). The idea is that, however far one pushes psychological analysis, the elements obtained must necessarily be what Brentano calls "intentional acts". To put it otherwise: the most basic separable parts of the mental flow are not mere sensory data, as claimed associationists and other psychologists of the time. Rather, they must be mental phenomena with an intentional object appearing in them.

For this reason, Brentano's position is best seen as a phenomenological dualism in the vein of William Hamilton (Dewalque & Seron 2015): every phenomenon is necessarily such that it appears within something else or that something else appears in it. This view was largely polemical at the time the *Psychology* was published. Many psychologists of the period — including Wundt, whose famous *Principles of Physiological Psychology* came out the same year — conceived of representations as compounds of (nonrepresentational) sensations, and sensations monistically as the ultimate elements of mental life.

Thus understood, the intentionality thesis entails both that the intentional object is a part of the act, something that appears "within" it, and that it is not separable from the act. Therefore, it must be an *inseparable* part of the act, with the consequence that it is not an "element" in the proper sense of the term (Brentano 1982: 157/1995b: 166) and that the mereological relation "... appears in..." is not a relation of composition properly speaking. The intentional object is not a real part as is the partial act of hearing *Peter and the Wolf* within the complex act of feeling pleasure when hearing *Peter and the Wolf*, but an abstract or "distinctional" part (see CHAP. 17) obtained by purely conceptual means (Brentano 1982: 13-14/1995b: 16; see also Antonelli 2000: 109-10, Dewalque 2013). More on this in §4.

3. Induction

Brentano's plea for an empirical psychology was one aspect of his conviction that the method of psychology should be modeled on the method of natural science (Brentano 1874: 102/1973a: 71; see also Haller 1989, Ierna 2014): where natural science is ultimately based on *external* perception, empirical psychology is ultimately based on *inner* perception, and both target phenomena rather than underlying substances. Another key aspect was the idea that the psychologist's task was to set out the laws that govern mental phenomena, and that this required using the inductive method of natural science (Brentano 1874: 66, 102ff./1973a: 47, 70ff.). The most general psychological laws, he claims, are won by "psychological induction".

At a second stage, special laws are derived deductively from the higher laws and then tested “by direct induction from experience”.

In the *Psychology*, however, Brentano holds that there is at least one major difference between physical and psychological laws. Although the highest laws of psychology are laws “of a very comprehensive universality” (Brentano 1874: 102/1973a: 71), Brentano disagrees with Herbart and Fechner that they are “exact” or a priori laws such as those found in mathematics. Insofar as psychological knowledge is grounded in memory, and as long as mental intensity cannot be measured accurately enough, psychological laws are to be understood as mere “empirical laws”, fraught with inaccuracy and uncertainty (Brentano 1874: 102/1973a: 70). That is, they are inductive laws rather than exceptionless laws. (It is worth noting that, for Brentano, this did not preclude the use of mathematics, especially statistics, in empirical psychology (Brentano 1874: 102/1973a: 70). To Wundt, who argued that mental phenomena were mathematizable and therefore lend themselves to exact knowledge, Brentano replied that everything knowable is countable and hence mathematizable, and that it would be absurd to infer from this that all knowledge is exact (Brentano 1874: 94-95/1973a: 65-66).)

Brentano also suggests that, beside ordinary induction, the psychologist may in some cases use the “historical” or “inverse deductive method” elaborated by John Stuart Mill (Brentano 1874: 104/1973a: 72; see also Mill 1843: 585ff.). On this method, instead of trying to confirm general laws through direct induction, one starts with direct induction and then explains the special laws obtained by appeal to more general laws. This is, then, a kind of inference to the best explanation.

4. A priori Psychological Laws?

It is important to note that the only psychological laws considered in the *Psychology* were “laws of the succession of mental phenomena” (Brentano 1874: 66, 91-92, etc./1973a: 47, 63, etc.), that is, the kind of laws which Brentano would later call “genetic laws”. It is only in the late 1880s, after Brentano had introduced the distinction between descriptive and genetic psychology, that he began to investigate the nature and epistemological status of psychological laws that are not genetic. This led him to step back and explore the possibility of a psychological a priori. Thus, in the lectures of 1887-8, he presents descriptive psychology as an exact science, as opposed to genetic psychology which “will presumably have to renounce forever any claim to exactness” (Brentano 1982: 1-5/1995b: 3-7).

Suppose you see a rectangle of which one half is blue and the other is yellow. The chromatic contrast between the two surfaces can be causally explained, say, by the presence of different types of cones in the retina. This explanation can be expressed as an inductive law which associates something physical (the presence of different types of cones) with something mental (the chromatic contrast between the two half-rectangles). Such laws, in Brentano's view, pertain to genetic psychology. However, it is plausible to think that something more is required. For the explanandum — the chromatic contrast as a purely mental fact — is somehow presupposed. The genetic psychologist would not investigate the blue-yellow contrast if she had no previous evidence that blue contrasts with yellow. Now, we know that blue contrasts with yellow not by observing the structure of the retina, but simply by experiencing the contrast. For Brentano, it is precisely one of the descriptive psychologist's tasks to identify and clarify the mental facts to be then explained genetically. As Brentano's student Carl Stumpf summarizes, "offer is always on the side of phenomenology, and demand on the side of physiology" (Stumpf 1907: 32).

The descriptive psychologist, like the genetic psychologist, enunciates laws. For example: every judgment is either positive or negative, every feeling requires a presentation, blue is a different color from yellow, green is composed of blue and yellow, etc. However, both kinds of laws appear to be very different in their epistemological character. The descriptive psychologist's laws are presumably exceptionless. She does not claim, for example, that green is *in most cases*, or *until shown otherwise*, composed of blue and yellow (Brentano 1982: 3-4/1995b: 5-6). Rather, it is a priori self-evident that this is so *in all possible cases*.

The question that immediately arises is how to make the idea of a psychological a priori compatible with empiricism at all. According to Brentano, answering this question requires making clear what a concept actually is, and this requires dispelling many confusions generated by Kant's conception of a priori knowledge.

Fundamental to Brentano's position on this point is his rejection of Kant's synthetic a priori (Brentano 1925, 1956). All a priori knowledge, he claims, consists in analytic judgments, hence in judgments about concepts. This must apply to descriptive psychology as well. Psychological laws such as "there can exist no judgment that is neither positive nor negative" require no more than analyzing concepts, for example that of judgment; they are about relations of *conceptual* inseparability or incompatibility.

At first glance, Brentano's view seems very paradoxical and hardly tenable. On this view, for example, Helmholtz's law of harmonics is an analytic judgment as are logical and mathematical laws (Brentano 1925: 10). No observation is needed to know that all musical sounds produce harmonics at the octave, it is enough to analyze the concept of sound, namely

to “make it distinct in reference to intrinsic features without which it would not be the same concept” (Ibid.). According to Brentano, this view seems paradoxical only because it is usually assumed, following Kant, that being a priori involves not deriving from an experiential source (or deriving from a nonexperiential source). On the one hand, it seems obvious that Helmholtz’s law — in one sense or another — is empirical. On the other hand, Brentano contends it is a priori and thus merely conceptual. Brentano’s claim, however, is that this Kantian understanding of the a priori is misleading and should be abandoned.

In fact, he argues, the laws of descriptive psychology are, without contradiction, both empirical and analytic. His argument is twofold. First, all our concepts are empirical, that is, “either taken immediately from experience (*Anschauung*) or combined out of marks that are taken from experience” (Brentano 1976: 3/1988: 1). Even logical concepts — including Kant’s “pure concepts of the understanding” — actually are psychological concepts derived by abstraction from inner experience. Secondly, and more importantly, concepts are mental phenomena, they are *thought* and thus *experienced*. Far from involving turning away from experience, conceptual analysis must consist in making distinct phenomena that are given in inner experience. For example, although (inner) perception is needed in order to *acquire* the concept of judgment, once the concept has been acquired, it is enough to analyze it to realize that all judgments must be either positive or negative.

For this reason, Brentano holds that the core of descriptive psychology’s method must be “intuition” in the sense of direct acquaintance or *insight* (*Einsicht*). Inner experience gives us acquaintance with conceptual representations and hence with apodictic relations of inseparability or incompatibility, which are to be distinguished through conceptual analysis. We take it as a priori self-evident — even if indistinctly — that green with no hue of yellow is impossible, that no judgment that is neither positive nor negative can possibly be experienced, and so on.

What is important here is that the a priori laws of descriptive psychology, like those of logic and mathematics, are neither about nonexperiential entities nor obtained from nonexperiential sources. They are a priori judgments about the data of inner experience, and they are won through analysis of inner experience. Thus, Brentano’s view of descriptive psychology’s laws as a priori is fully consistent with his empiricist rejection of pure concepts and “a priori evidence” (Brentano 1982: 74/1995b: 76; cf. Brentano 1925: 26, 40).

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² This terminology goes back to William Hamilton (1859: 85-6, 88, 91), who uses the term “empirical (or descriptive) psychology” as synonymous with “phenomenology of the mind”. The term “phenomenal psychology” (*phänomenale Psychologie*) is also used in Brentano (1874: 105/1973a: 72). The term “psychognosy”, which Brentano used in replacement of “descriptive psychology” from 1891 until his death, can be traced back to 1880-81 (Brentano 1982: 1/1995b: 3; Albertazzi 2006: 119).

³ The question of whether “intuition” and a priori knowledge are compatible with empiricism plays a central role in the current epistemological debate. See (Bealer 1992; BonJour 1998; Boghossian & Peacocke 2000).