

Intentionality and Epistemological Relativity

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Brentano's *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* is primarily, although not exclusively, an epistemological treatise.¹ Its purpose — the reader will likely concede this point at least — is to provide an epistemological basis for a “psychology from an empirical standpoint”. This article presents an epistemological reading of Brentano's theory of intentionality — a reading which I think is, as such, more in accordance with its historical context.

I will adopt two assumptions without further discussion. First, I take for granted that Brentano's epistemology, in 1874, was not only empiricist, but also phenomenalist. This view is controversial, but it has some support in the literature (Tolman 1987; Bell 1990: 8–9; Pacherie 1993: 13; Simons 1995; Crane 2006; Seron 2014; Seron forthcoming).² Secondly, I assume that Brentano's aim in the *Psychology* was to make phenomenism less problematic by distinguishing two things which standard phenomenism does not distinguish, namely *reference* and *intentional aboutness*. Now, there are good reasons to think that this distinction is the cornerstone of his theory of intentionality (Cayla 1993; Sauer 2006; Fréchette 2012: 330). Therefore, it is plausible to say that Brentano's theory of intentionality has as its heart an epistemological concern.

In the first three sections, I examine Brentano's rejection of epistemological realism and its phenomenalist implications. In sections 4 to 6, I argue that Brentano's theory of intentionality is better seen as a more sophisticated variant of William Hamilton's “theory of the relativity of knowledge”. My underlying hypothesis is that the notion of intentionality — the distinction between real and intentional existence, direct and oblique modes — functions primarily as a means for overcoming some of the inherent limitations of standard phenomenism.

1. Three objections against epistemological realism

What is a “psychology from an empirical standpoint”? It is at least possible to say what it is not. As the first chapter of the *Psychology* clearly suggests, the view Brentano opposes is epistemological realism:

We have seen what kind of knowledge the natural scientist is able to attain. The phenomena of light, sound, heat, spatial location and locomotion which he studies

are not things which really and truly 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, shapes and sizes. But this is as far as we can go. That which truly exists does not come to appearance, and that which appears does not truly exist. The truth of physical phenomena is, as they say, only a relative truth. The phenomena of inner perception are a different matter. They are true in themselves. As they appear to be, so they are in reality, a fact which is attested to by the evidence with which they are perceived. Who could deny, then, that this constitutes a great advantage of psychology over the natural sciences? (Brentano 1973: 28–29, Engl. trans. 19–20, slightly modified)

Since Oskar Kraus³, this text has most often been read as a plea for indirect realism. But this is a mistake. A more careful reading shows that Brentano here argues against indirect realism, indicates some of its weaknesses and considers an alternative epistemology.

What does this text actually say? Brentano outlines a Lockean realist view of knowledge. On this view, the subject has representations — sensory experiences — that are caused by external reality. The content of these representations, the physical phenomenon, functions as a “sign” of external reality, just as smoke is both a sign and a causal effect of fire. Additionally, one assumes, as Locke did for primary qualities (Locke 1997: 136–137), that there is a relation of similarity between external reality and its phenomenal signs. Physical knowledge means to know physical substances (i.e., bodies) through their manifestations in the mind, which are assumed to be similar to them. Natural science indirectly refers to physical substances that exist “really” or “in themselves”.

According to Brentano (1973: 21–22, 26, Engl. trans. 14–15, 18), Aristotle, Leibniz, Spencer, and Lotze held a similar view regarding psychological knowledge: the psychologist knows the mental substance (i.e., soul) through her mental states which are phenomenally given in inner perception. The difference is that physical phenomena are causal effects of physical substances, while mental phenomena are modifications of mental substances.

Brentano does not reject this view outright. His claim is that it is impossible to elaborate a satisfying epistemology on the basis of it. Three objections are raised in the above quote:

(1) The first objection is against the view that some qualities are similar to the bodily realities that cause them. Brentano does not entirely reject this view, but he objects that, if it is true, then it is limited to “spatial phenomena, shapes and sizes”. By contrast, “the phenomena of light, sound, heat, spatial location and locomotion (...) are not an adequate representation of reality”. The objection is that phenomena of the first category are not enough. Physical

phenomena may stand in spatial relations that are somehow analogous to relations between bodies, “but this is as far as we can go” (*aber dies ist dann auch alles*), and this is plainly insufficient. For the natural scientist, Brentano emphasizes, studies phenomena of the second category as well.

(2) The second objection challenges the idea that knowledge is an indirect relation to substances. Physical phenomena, argues Brentano, may be caused by physical substances. However, this does not entail that physical substances (indirectly) *appear* to us. On the contrary, “that which truly exists does not come to appearance, and that which appears does not truly exist”.⁴ Perceiving the phenomenal effects of a body is not (indirectly) perceiving the body itself; perceiving the phenomenal states of a soul is not (indirectly) perceiving the soul itself. Substances do not appear, even indirectly, in experience. The only *objects* of experience are phenomena, which are numerically distinct from mental and physical substances.

A consequence of this is that the hypothesis that there exist physical or mental substances is a non-scientific, “metaphysical presupposition” (*metaphysische Voraussetzung*) (Brentano 1973: 27, Engl. trans. 18). External reality, Brentano claims, is a “fiction”:

But what entitles (*berechtigt*) us to assume that there are such substances? It has been said that such substances are not objects of experience; neither sense perception nor inner experience reveal substances to us. Just as in sense perception we encounter phenomena such as warmth, color and sound, in inner perception we encounter manifestations of thinking, feeling and willing. But we never encounter a being of which these things are properties. Such a being is a fiction to which no reality of any sort corresponds (*eine Fiktion, der keinerlei Wirklichkeit entspricht*), or whose existence could not possibly be proved, even if it did exist. (Brentano 1973: 15–16, Engl. trans. 10–11, slightly modified)

(3) The third objection is that realism conflicts with the epistemological relativity of physical knowledge: “The truth of physical phenomena is, as they say, only a relative truth.”

Here Brentano lays his cards on the table. For this last claim was familiar to the empiricist philosophers of the time. The thesis of the relativity of knowledge was prominently advocated by William Hamilton, John Stuart Mill, and Herbert Spencer. Roughly, the idea is that all knowledge is relative to our mental “faculties”, that is, *subjective*.⁵ Scientific knowledge is not knowledge of how things are really or “in themselves”, but of *phenomena*.

Even more, the passage quoted above strongly suggests that Brentano developed a radicalized version of the theory of the relativity of knowledge — a version which can strictly be called “phenomenalism”. Thus, this passage is almost word-for-word repetition of a passage in the *Examination of Hamilton’s Philosophy* (1865), in which John Stuart Mill examines what he considers to be an extreme form of the relativity of knowledge view:

Neither sense perception nor inner experience reveal substances to us. (...) we never encounter a being of which these things are properties. Such a being is a fiction to which no reality of any sort corresponds, or whose existence could not possibly be proved, even if it did exist. (Brentano 1973: 15–16, Engl. trans. 10–11)

We have no evidence of anything which, not being itself a sensation, is a substratum or hidden cause of sensations. The idea of such a substratum is a purely mental creation, to which we have no reason to think that there is any corresponding reality exterior to our minds. (Mill 1865b: 17)

Mill calls this view “idealism” and attributes it to Berkeley and Hume (Mill 1865b: 17–18). In fact, it is plausibly closer to Hamilton’s position than Mill thinks (cf. Hamner 2003), and Hamilton is plausibly the philosopher closest to Brentano on these questions. The overall idea is that the subject does not relate to her objects through ideas, but that her only objects are sensory phenomena. Substances, objects existing in themselves, are necessarily unknowable; only phenomena — the relative — can be known.⁶

2. An internalist variant of phenomenalism

Brentano’s epistemological paradigm in the 1874 *Psychology* is very similar. As I attempted to show elsewhere (Seron 2014), it is best seen as an internalist or psychological variant of phenomenalism, very close to the view held by Hamilton.

First, Brentano can be plausibly ascribed a form of phenomenalism: the objects of science are not, even indirectly, mental or physical substances, but only phenomena. This applies to physics as well as psychology. Brentano defines the former as “the science of physical phenomena” (Brentano 1973: 13, Engl. trans. 9), the latter as “the science of mental phenomena”. A psychology “from an empirical standpoint” is an “empirical science” (*Erfahrungswissenschaft*) (Brentano 1973: 9, 49, Engl. trans. 6, 35), that is, a “purely phenomenal science” (*ausschliesslich phänomenale Wissenschaft*) (Brentano 1973: 20, Engl. trans. 14). That is why Brentano — borrowing a famous phrase from Friedrich Albert Lange — advocates a “psychology without a soul”, that is, a psychology without mental substances.

Secondly, this phenomenalism can be called “internalist”, insofar as Brentano considers all phenomena, *mental as well as physical*, to be basically of a mental or internal nature.⁷ This internalist view stands in opposition to other forms of phenomenalism, for example Mach’s psychophysical monism. And once again, it is deeply Hamiltonian. In Hamilton’s view, philosophy is ultimately psychological because all knowledge is ultimately phenomenal (Hamilton 1859: 44–45).

As Husserl critically points out in his fifth *Logical Investigation*, this makes Brentano's use of the terms "inner" and "mental" inherently ambiguous. Physical phenomena are phenomena and hence, in some sense, something inner or mental. They are, as Brentano puts it, intentionally contained in a mental phenomenon. On this view, "perceiving this umbrella" means having an inner perception of one's own perception including its intentional content "this umbrella". In short: all perception is "inner" (Brentano 1982: 129).

The ambiguity of "mental" and "internal" is clearly captured in the two following quotes:

With respect to the definition of psychology, it might first seem as if the concept of mental phenomena would have to be broadened rather than narrowed, both because the physical phenomena of imagination fall within its scope at least as much as mental phenomena as previously defined, and because the phenomena which occur in sensation cannot be disregarded in the theory of sensation. It is obvious, however, that they are taken into account only as the content of mental phenomena when we describe the specific characteristics of the latter. (Brentano 1973: 140, Engl. trans. 100)

One is telling the truth if one says that phenomena are objects of inner perception, even though the term "inner" is actually superfluous. All phenomena are to be called inner because they all belong to one reality, be it as constituents or as correlates. (Brentano 1982: 129, Engl. trans. 137)

3. Lotze rather than Hamilton?

Nevertheless, there is a substantial difference between Brentano and Hamilton. In some ways, Brentano seems to be closer to Lotze than to Hamilton.⁸

Lotze agreed with Hamilton that physical substances were unknowable. Just as Hamilton declared matter to be "unknown and inconceivable" (Hamilton 1859: 97), Lotze claimed that it was "a thought completely impenetrable to our knowledge" (*für unsere Erkenntniss ein völlig undurchdringlicher Gedanke*) (Lotze 1852: 58). However, unlike Hamilton, Lotze restricted the principle of the relativity of knowledge only to physical substances. As a metaphysical spiritualist, he affirmed the possibility of absolute knowledge of mental substances through intellectual intuition.

At first glance, this view is not very far from Brentano's. On the one hand, as we have seen, Brentano agreed with Hamilton and Lotze that physical knowledge is relative. On the other hand, his claim of the real existence of mental phenomena makes it tempting to hold that, like Lotze but unlike Hamilton, he considered an absolute knowledge of mental life to be possible.

This parallel, however, is defective. Even supposing Brentano considers absolute psychological knowledge possible, there remains a significant difference. I think his view is

as follows: Lotze is right that absolute psychological knowledge is possible, but in the case of psychological knowledge, “absolute” is not opposed to “phenomenal”. Such absolute knowledge is not knowledge of the soul, but of phenomena alone. Therefore, what exists in itself, in the mental realm, is the phenomenon. Likewise, Hamilton is right that psychological knowledge must be purely phenomenal, but he is wrong to conclude from this that it is relative, and hence that all knowledge is relative. For Brentano, it may be said, psychological knowledge is both *absolute and phenomenal*.

One implication of this is that it no more makes sense to distinguish between how mental phenomena are objectively and how they subjectively appear:

The words “phenomenon” or “appearance” (*Erscheinung*) are often used in opposition to “things which really and truly exist”. (...) What has been said about the objects of external perception does not, however, apply in the same way to objects of inner perception. In their case, no one has ever shown that someone who considers these phenomena to be true would thereby become involved in contradictions. (Brentano 1973: 13–14, Engl. trans. 9–10)

To be a phenomenon, something must exist in itself. It is wrong to set phenomena in opposition to what exists in itself. (Brentano 1982: 129, Engl. trans. 137)

This view certainly makes Brentano more akin to William James or Ernst Mach than to Lotze. To illustrate this point, suffice it to compare the above quote with the following from Mach’s *Analysis of Sensations*:

A common and popular way of thinking and speaking is to contrast “appearance” with “reality”. (...) to speak of “appearance” may have a practical meaning, but cannot have a scientific meaning. (...) Where there is no contrast, the distinction between dream and waking, between appearance and reality, is quite otiose and worthless. (Mach 1922: 8–9, Engl. trans. 10–11)

4. Intentionality and relativity

On the interpretation I propose, Brentano’s theory of intentionality is an original attempt to deepen Hamilton’s epistemology. In a nutshell: it is an epistemological theory whose function is to clarify what it means for knowledge to be “relative”.

Consider a very simple example of physical knowledge: the knowledge that the umbrella in front of me is yellow. On Brentano’s account, as we have seen, the object being known here is a phenomenon, thus something “inner”. “The objects of so-called external perception (...),”

claims Brentano in the *Psychology*, “demonstrably do not exist outside of us” (Brentano 1973: 14, Engl. trans. 10).

What does it mean? In my estimation, there is only one way to understand that statement: representing the yellow umbrella — for example perceiving or remembering it, affirming that it is yellow, etc. — means *being conscious (C) of one’s own mental act (A) with its psychological property of being about the yellow umbrella*. My mental act appears to me in inner perception with certain intrinsic properties, and among these properties is that of being about the umbrella. This can be symbolized as follows:

C[A(the yellow umbrella)]

This notation makes readily apparent the ambiguity of “inner” and “mental”, since the phrase “the yellow umbrella”, which denotes a physical phenomenon, is here contained in “A(...)”, which denotes a mental phenomenon. The physical phenomenon is the content of a mental phenomenon. In this “broadened” sense, it is something inner or mental.

The idea is twofold. On the one hand, the intentionality of outer perception — its property of being about the umbrella — requires it to have two objects, namely a “primary” (the umbrella) and a “secondary object” (the mental act). But on the other hand, Brentano’s claim is that, in spite of this, the consciousness C is numerically one, with the consequence that the two objects are mutually inseparable and that the difference between the two presentations is only an abstract or conceptual one:

The presentation of the sound and the presentation of the presentation of the sound form a single mental phenomenon; it is only by considering it in its relation to two different objects, one of which is a physical phenomenon and the other a mental phenomenon, that we divide it conceptually into two presentations. (Brentano 1973: 179, Engl. trans. 127)

The two objects are necessarily dependent on each other: necessarily, every mental phenomenon is intentionally directed towards something and every physical phenomenon is the “correlate” (*Korrelat*) of a mental phenomenon. Together, these two theses — intentional directedness and intentional in-existence — constitute Brentano’s theory of intentionality.⁹

There are striking similarities between this theory and Hamilton’s theory of the relativity of knowledge.¹⁰ The notion of “correlate” is distinctively Hamiltonian. In Hamilton’s view, every known object is “correlative” just as all knowledge is “relative”. Both the relative and the correlative are inconceivable in isolation from each other. Therefore, the absolute (the non-relative) is unknowable.

Hamilton's epistemology involves a particular view of relations.¹¹ First, every relation can be reciprocated. "A is the father of B" is equivalent to "B is the son (or daughter) of A". The same applies to the relation "A knows B", which is equivalent to "B is known by A". Secondly, the correlates are inconceivable and unknowable separately: "We cannot conceive, we cannot know, we cannot define the one relative, without, *pro tanto*, conceiving, knowing, defining also the other" (Hamilton 1859: 689).¹² Accordingly, all knowledge is knowledge of the relative, that is, phenomenal knowledge or "consciousness". To know a physical object is to be conscious of a physical datum as a correlate, that is, as something that is inseparably interwoven with a mental "relative". "Thus our knowledge is of relative existence only, seeing that existence in itself, or absolute existence, is no object of knowledge" (Hamilton 1859: 99). As Brentano puts it, "the knowledge of the correlatives is one" (Brentano 1982: 130).

In my estimation, a merit of Brentano's account is that it reconciles the relativity of knowledge thesis with the commonsense view that the concepts that are used in science are not relative concepts. On the one hand, the physicist's knowledge of the yellow umbrella is relative: what she knows is just how the umbrella appears in her mind. But on the other hand, the physicist does not conceive of the yellow umbrella as something whose existence is relative, but simply as a physical reality that exists in itself.

Let us consider this point more carefully. According to Brentano's two theses mentioned above, every datum of consciousness combines a primary and a secondary object, for example a perception and a yellow umbrella. To perceive the umbrella is to innerly perceive one's own "outer" perception with its property of being about the umbrella. This view is aligned against the associationist view that the data of consciousness — sensations — are intrinsically non-representational and that representations are produced secondarily through associative synthesis of sensations (Seron 2012: 129 ff.). In direct opposition to associationists, Brentano claims that the ultimate separable elements of mental life are intrinsically representational. Put otherwise: all that appears to consciousness necessarily presents itself as a duality of mutually inseparable primary and secondary objects. However far psychological analysis is pushed, the elements obtained are always phenomena that contain an intentional object. The distinction between primary and secondary objects is merely a conceptual distinction.

The idea of an irreducible duality of the phenomenal field is the core tenet of the "dualism" endorsed by Hamilton in his critique of Thomas Brown's *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Mind* (1830). The "fact of consciousness", he affirms, involves a "primitive duality", namely the correlation of self and non-self, of spirit and matter (Hamilton 1855, 67): "If we appeal to consciousness, consciousness gives, even in the last analysis — in the unity of knowledge, a *duality of existence*" (Hamilton 1855: 66).

Now, Hamilton argues, drawing on Thomas Reid's argument from common sense, that the immediate data of consciousness have an epistemological privilege over other forms of

knowledge (Hamilton 1855: 94). “Consciousness,” as he famously proclaims, “is to the philosopher what the Bible is to the theologian” (Hamilton 1859: 58).¹³ In consequence, (phenomenological) dualism — as opposed to the “unitarian systems” of idealists, materialists, and identity theorists — is the best philosophical position.¹⁴

5. Direct reference, oblique intentionality

Phenomenalism has obvious difficulties, most of which are due to the fact that it takes objective properties to be somehow reducible to phenomenal properties. My suggestion is that it is to a great extent in order to overcome these difficulties that Brentano developed his theory of intentionality.

What is crucial here is the fact that intentionality — the “relation to a content”, as Brentano calls it — is not reference. For example, the judgment “the umbrella is yellow” is about an object believed to exist in the outside world. However, the object it actually refers to is a phenomenon, hence something that occurs in the mind. The judgment, although about something extra-mental, actually refers (in a broadened sense of “mental”) to something mental. Accordingly, intentionality is better seen as an intrinsic property of the mental act than as a real relation. As Brentano puts it, the represented phenomenon does not exist really, but only “intentionally”. The actual object is the innerly perceived mental phenomenon.

A direct consequence of this is that physical or psychological knowledge is independent of the existence of the known object. On Brentano’s variant of phenomenalism, the natural scientist can go on talking of physical realities and ascribing objective properties to them even though there be no outside world.¹⁵ Likewise, the psychologist can legitimately study mental acts even though they are accessible only through memory and no longer exist at the time they are described. To sum up: a purely phenomenal science — a science “from an empirical standpoint” — is possible. In my interpretation, demonstrating this last claim is the primary aim of the *Psychology* of 1874. And, as I will argue, this claim has a strong Hamiltonian flavor.

The distinction between reference and intentionality is reflected in the distinction Brentano later drew between direct and oblique modes. Consider the judgment “the centaur is a poetic fiction” (Brentano 1925: 60 *suiv.*; cf. Sauer 2013: 222–224). What is its object? The judgment is about the centaur, which is a physical phenomenon. In Brentano’s words, it gets its content from a presentation of the centaur. However, the centaur does not exist and is not an object in the proper sense: it is presented *obliquely* — in a non-referential, purely phenomenological way, as we could say. The real object of the judgment, claims Brentano, must be the secondary object as it is presented *directly* in inner perception:

Hence we are certain that one cannot make the being or non-being of a centaur an object as one can a centaur; one can only make the person affirming or denying the centaur an object, in which case the centaur, to be sure, becomes an object in a special *modus obliquus* at the same time. (Brentano 1925: 162, Engl. trans. 294)

Thus, the ontological commitment involved in “the centaur is a poetic fiction” can be made explicit by rephrasing the sentence as: “There exist mental acts that are such that they are of a fictional character, are experienced by poets, and have the property of being about the centaur”.¹⁶

For Brentano, this applies not only to inexistent objects, but to all objects of science. The astronomer’s judgment that Saturn is surrounded by rings is really about a celestial body that exists in the external world. It is true that Saturn is surrounded by rings just as it is true that the Centaur is a poetic fiction. However, Saturn is not the really existing object that makes the judgment true. The judgment that Saturn has rings can be true even though Saturn does not exist, just as the judgment that the Centaur is a poetic fiction is true even though the Centaur does not exist. In a word: a purely phenomenal science is possible, but only in an oblique mode. “The truth of physical phenomena,” argues Brentano, “is only a relative truth” (Brentano 1973: 29, Engl. trans. 20). Physical phenomena and remembered mental phenomena do not really exist; their existence is “relative” in Hamilton’s sense of the word, that is, purely phenomenal. Science does not tell us how things really are, but how they appear.

The natural scientist talks about physical reality as something that exists “in itself”. When she does so, however, her use of physical language is merely phenomenological. Thus, in a sense, the only existences she asserts are mental. The fact that Saturn appears as really existent does not entail that it really exists, but merely that there is a “relative”, namely something — a subject, a mental act — to which it appears as really existent. “It is certain,” claims Brentano, “that neither we nor any other being who grasps something with direct evidence can have anything but himself as the object of this knowledge” (Brentano 1974: 5–6, Engl. trans. 6). Compare the following passage from Hamilton’s *Discussions*:

All that we know either of subject or object, either of mind or matter, is only a knowledge (...) of the phenomenal. (...) Our knowledge, whether of mind or matter, can be nothing more than a knowledge of the relative manifestations of an existence, which in itself it is our highest wisdom to recognize as beyond the reach of philosophy. (Hamilton 1855: 22)

It is important to note that this view is consistent with Brentano’s critique of subjectivism and relativism. First, as we have seen, psychological truths, unlike physical truths, are absolute

truths. The truth that Saturn has rings is only a relative truth, but it is true “in itself” that Saturn appears to the astronomer as surrounded by rings. Secondly, an advantage of Brentano’s account is that, at least to some extent, it preserves the objectivity of the natural science.¹⁷ The natural science is defined not as a science of bodies but as a “science of physical phenomena”, that is, as a science of how physical objects appear to us. For example, the astronomer tells us how Saturn looks — and Saturn plainly appears to her as mind-independent. The judgment that Saturn has rings may be true even though Saturn does not exist.

For this reason, Brentano strongly insists, in the *Psychology*, that physical truths, even though they are relative, are not about mental acts. As he argues, the property of being presented (or appearing) is obviously not “contained in the color as one of its elements” (Brentano 1973: 130–131, Engl. trans. 93). The primary objects of the natural scientist’s judgments are not mental acts, but mind-independent realities, that is, phenomena that are obliquely presented as mind-independent. Thus, the concepts used in natural sciences are not relative concepts: “The concept of sound is not a relative concept. If it were, the act of hearing would be the primary object along with the sound” (Brentano 1973: 185, Engl. trans. 132).

6. Lotze or Hamilton?

Let us return now to psychology. I suggested, in section 3, that Brentano, unlike Hamilton, did not extend the relativity of knowledge principle to psychological knowledge. But this interpretation is only half-true, *i.e.*, true only with respect to inner perception. However, Brentano makes the difference between inner perception — unreflected consciousness — and the psychologist’s introspective knowledge.

Just as Hamilton had claimed some decades earlier that consciousness was “the source from whence we must derive every fact in the Philosophy of Mind” (Hamilton 1859: 183), Brentano holds in the *Psychology* that “inner perception of our own mental phenomena is the primary source of the experiences essential to psychological investigations” (Brentano 1973: 48, Engl. trans. 34; cf. 40, Engl. trans. 29). In his view, however, introspection does not belong to perception, but to memory. The primary object of introspection is not the mental act as I presently experience it, but a past act I presently experience a memory of (Brentano 1973: 40 ff., Engl. trans. 29 ff.). Now, memory is a form of oblique presentation (Brentano 1925: 162, Engl. trans. 294), that is, a presentation whose object exists only intentionally. As opposed to the objects of perception, remembered objects no longer really exist. Therefore, the psychologist, like the natural scientist, makes use of oblique presentations. Her (primary) object is not her mental life as it directly presents itself to her in inner perception, but her past mental life or that of another subject (Brentano 1973: 40–61). Quite paradoxically, what the psychologist observes (*beobachtet*) are objects that no longer exist. But this does not mean

that these objects are not given in present experience. The idea is that they *are* presently given, *although not perceptually*. When the psychologist presently experiences her act *A* of remembering another act *B*, the act *B* really appears — or is really presented — in *A*, although only *in obliquo*.

Most interestingly, Hamilton had come to a very similar conclusion in his *Lectures* of 1859:

What are the contents of an act of memory? An act of memory is merely a present state of mind, which we are conscious of, not as absolute, but as relative to, and representing, another state of mind. (...) All that is immediately known in the act of memory, is the present mental modification ; that is, the representation and concomitant belief. Beyond this mental modification, we know nothing; and this mental modification is not only known to consciousness, but only exists in and by consciousness. Of any past object, real or ideal, the mind knows and can know nothing, for *ex hypothesi* no such object now exists; or if it be said to know such an object, it can only be said to know it mediately, as represented in the present mental modification. Properly speaking, however, we know only the actual and present, and all real knowledge is an immediate knowledge. (Hamilton 1859: 152)

The upshot of all this is that, for both Brentano and Hamilton, *all science*, natural as well as psychological, is “*oblique*” or “*relative*”.

This view is not much different from the one defended by Carl Stumpf. Mental and physical objects differ, claims Stumpf, in that the former are “immediately given” while the latter are “derived” (*erschlossen*), that is, hypothetically constructed on the basis of phenomenal data. In this sense, psychology has “a considerable epistemological advantage over natural sciences” (Stumpf 1907: 21). But on the other hand, psychology is not restricted to one’s own mental life as presently experienced: “Besides the own <mental> functions present in the subject who perceives and thinks them, we also deal with her past functions and those of other subjects” (Stumpf 1907: 20). Psychological knowledge too is, at least to a great extent, a derivative kind of knowledge. This Brentanian line of thought is in full accord with the one pursued by Hamilton, of which it can be regarded as a variant: all scientific knowledge is “relative”.

It is important to highlight that the epistemology just outlined is not so far removed from Lotze’s epistemology as might at first appear. Lotze certainly affirms that absolute knowledge of the soul is possible. But at the same time, this absolute knowledge — intellectual intuition — has a function analogous to that of Brentano’s inner perception. Thus, just as Brentano distinguishes inner perception from psychological observation, Lotze distinguishes knowledge of the soul from scientific knowledge and assigns it to poetry and religion (Lotze 1852: 66 ff.).¹⁸

7. Conclusion

We may summarize the results of the above discussion as follows:

Brentano's theory of intentionality has two distinct components: the thesis that necessarily every mental phenomenon is intentional and the thesis that necessarily every physical phenomenon "in-exists" in a mental phenomenon. First, every (separable) mental entity presents itself as a duality of act and content. Every mental phenomenon must have an intentional "correlate", with the consequence that intentionality cannot derive from associations between pre-intentional mental phenomena. Secondly, physical phenomena do not exist really, but only in the sense of intentional existence.

As I suggested, these two theses are — at least in embryonic form — already present in Hamilton. The first one is clearly anticipated in Hamilton's Reid-inspired "dualism", according to which every fact of consciousness is a duality of self and non-self. In Hamilton's view, consciousness reveals to us two distinct series of phenomena, mental and physical, which are irreducible to each other: materialism as well as idealism are false.

We now understand better how Brentano's psychology, although "purely phenomenal", is different from standard forms of phenomenalism. In his 1905-1906 dictations on *Knowledge and Error*, Brentano explicitly stigmatizes Ernst Mach's "break with dualism" — which he traces back to Spinoza — as a throwback to pre-scientific psychology (Brentano 1988: 47; cf. Brentano 1979: 228–229). The theory of intentionality is a continuation and subtle refinement of that Hamilton-style dualism which Mach's psychophysical identity thesis aims to challenge. Mach's denial of the difference between mental and physical phenomena, between sensing and sensed, amounts to "ignoring the fact that everything mental relates to an object" (Brentano 1988: 188; cf. 190).

Our discussion has also shown that the second thesis was broadly similar to Hamilton's theory of the relativity of knowledge. What the natural scientist knows is not the physical thing that really exists, but phenomena whose existence is relative to our mental faculties. Brentano's theory of intentionality could arguably be seen as an attempt to clarify what the relativity of knowledge means from a phenomenalist perspective. The issue at stake is that the two theses may seem at odds. On the one hand, dualism involves the view that colors, heat, spatial locomotion, etc., are by no means psychologizable. On the other hand, the intentional existence thesis involves that physical phenomena do not exist outside the mind. How to make these two claims compatible? To this question, Brentano's answer is as follows: physical knowledge *is* (obliquely) *about* physical reality, but it (directly) *refers to* mental phenomena. The advantage of this approach is that it allows one to consistently *hold together phenomenalism and Hamiltonian dualism*.

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² I leave open the question of whether the 1874 *Psychology* defends a metaphysical or — as Crane and Simons claim — only an epistemological phenomenalism. Brentano’s later critique of the correspondence theory of truth suggests at least that he may have endorsed a form of metaphysical phenomenalism at a later time.

³ See (Kraus 1973: lxxxix, 270–271), relying on Brentano’s claim that the concept of external existence is not self-contradictory (Brentano 1973: 132). However, consistency does not entail truth, and Brentano comments in the following sentence that “we will nevertheless make no mistake if in general we deny to physical phenomena any existence other than intentional existence”!

⁴ The context clearly shows that “that which truly exists” refers to substances as opposed to phenomena. This traditional word use is rejected further on in the *Psychology*, when Brentano attributes real existence to mental phenomena that are presently experienced.

⁵ Hamilton uses the term “relative truth” as synonymous with “subjective truth” (Hamilton 1859: 645).

⁶ “But the meaning of these terms will be best illustrated by now stating and explaining the great axiom, that all human knowledge, consequently that all human philosophy, is only of the relative or phenomenal. In this proposition, the term *relative* is opposed to the term *absolute*; and, therefore, in saying that we know only the relative, I virtually assert that we know nothing absolute, — nothing existing absolutely; that is, in and for itself, and without relation to us and our faculties. (...) But as the phenomena appear only in conjunction, we are compelled by the constitution of our nature to think them conjoined in and by something (...) But this something, absolutely and in itself, — *i.e.* considered apart from its phenomena, — is to us as zero. It is only in its qualities, only in its effects, in its relative or phenomenal existence, that it is cognizable or conceivable” (Hamilton 1859: 96–97). See also (Spencer 1862: 68 ff.) and, on Mill’s version, (Scarre 1989: 154 ff.). Hamilton’s use of the phrase “phenomenal existence” and its synonym “relative existence” corresponds to what

Brentano calls “phenomenal or intentional existence” (Brentano 1973: 129). See (Hamilton 1859: 104), where “phenomenon” is said to denote the relative.

⁷ This is how Brentano puts the point in the quote below, where he paradoxically proposes to “broaden” the meaning of “mental phenomenon” to include physical phenomena. Of course, the idea that physical phenomena can *in some broader sense* be called “mental” (namely insofar as they are contents of mental phenomena) does not undermine the distinction between mental and physical phenomena, which is at the heart of Brentano’s theory of intentionality. More will be said about this topic in section 4.

⁸ On Lotze’s epistemology, see (Seron 2015).

⁹ Chisholm drew a like distinction in (Chisholm 2006). I see no reason to think, as Chisholm did, that Brentano abandoned the second thesis in his later work.

¹⁰ Some significant differences between the two philosophers are well documented in the recent literature. One of them is that Brentano, unlike Hamilton, considered feelings to be intentional (Brentano 1973: 125 ff., Engl. trans. 89 ff.; Baumgartner 1996: 250; Massin 2013: 311 ff.).

¹¹ See (Hamilton 1859: 688–689) and (Mill 1865a: 45–46). For a comparison between Brentano’s theory of intentionality and Mill’s theory of relation, see (De Libera 2011).

¹² Cf. (Mill 1865a: 46): “A name, therefore, is said to be relative, when, over and above the object which it denotes, it implies in its signification the existence of another object (...). Or (to express the same meaning in other words) a name is relative, when, being the name of one thing, its signification cannot be explained but by mentioning another.”

¹³ Cf. (Brentano 1973: 1, Engl. trans. xxvii): “My psychological standpoint is empirical; experience alone is my teacher.”

¹⁴ Interestingly, Hamilton views the later Scholastics’ intentional *species* as closer to Lockean representationalism, which he rejects, following Reid (Hamilton 1855: 67).

¹⁵ This is possible because Brentano redefines truth in terms of evidence. Evidence requires nothing more than inner perception: no true-making correspondence with external reality is required in order for the natural scientist’s judgment to be evident, and hence true. In this sense, Brentano’s theory of truth can be viewed as an attempt to rescue phenomenalism from skepticism.

¹⁶ This phrasing is slightly different from the one provided by Brentano (1925: 61, Engl. trans. 219).

¹⁷ Cf. (Brentano 1970: 148), about subjectivism: “This <confusion> occurs when one ascribes a subjective truth to sensible perception. What is true is this: the seen object does not exist; the seeing — the process that the subject undergoes — does exist. But *that* this process exists is true not only for the subject, but for everyone.”

¹⁸ A very similar view was later defended by Bergson (1990).