

Franz Brentano's Critique of Free Will

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In: Chr. Erhard & T. Keiling (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology of Agency*, New York: Routledge, 2021.

Draft version

The German philosopher Franz Brentano is usually portrayed not only as one of the founding fathers of the so-called phenomenological tradition, but also as having played a significant role in the history of contemporary ethics, through his theory of value and will. In spite of this, Brentano offered no proper theory of action in the vein of later attempts by direct or indirect followers. His ethics is basically about feelings, and feelings can be ethically right or wrong even if they intrinsically involve no reference to action. This is so even in the case of desire: for example, you can desire that the weather gets warmer (Montague 2017: 113).

However, Brentano's account of volitions does make reference to action.¹ Insofar as Brentano bequeathed us a fully-developed theory of the will of his own, it can be said that he indirectly contributed to the theory of action. This is particularly true of his critique of free will, which the present chapter aims to discuss and explore.

Brentano intended to investigate free will in the fifth of the six planned books of the *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, devoted to emotion and will (Brentano 1924: 1, Engl. trans.: xxvii; Brentano 1925: 110, ftn., Engl. trans.: 254) – a book which, unfortunately, he never wrote. Most of Brentano's reflections on this topic are found in Part 3 of his 1876-

¹ Cf. Brentano (1925: 115; Engl. trans. 257; Montague 2017: 114): "Every volition or striving in the strict sense refers to an action. It is not simply a desire for something to happen but a desire for something to happen as a result of the desire itself. An act of will is impossible for someone who does not yet know, or at least suspect, that certain phenomena of love and desire directly or indirectly bring about the loved object." Brentano's theory of will is well-documented in the literature. See, among recent works, Montague (2017), Kriegel (2017), and Kriegel (2018: Ch. 7). By contrast, there has been very little research on Brentano's critique of free will. The only study I am aware of is Modenato (1981).

1894 Vienna lectures on practical philosophy that were posthumously published as *The Foundation and Construction of Ethics* by Franziska Mayer-Hillebrand. Other relevant sources include the second volume of the *Psychology* and the 1889 lecture *The Origin of our Knowledge of Right and Wrong*.

Before beginning, three points should be underlined. First, Brentano considers the will neither as a sufficient nor even as a necessary condition for freedom: there can be volitions that are not free as well as free acts – for example “the pangs of remorse over an earlier transgression, malicious pleasure, and many other phenomena of joy and sorrow” – that are not volitions (Brentano 1925: 110-111; Engl. trans.: 254-255). Secondly, the problem of freedom, as Brentano sees it, has to do with time and causation. As such, it belongs to genetic rather than to descriptive psychology.² Thirdly and finally, Brentano is interested in the freedom of will rather than of action. In his Vienna lectures on ethics, he makes a distinction between the *actus a voluntate imperatus* and the *actus elicited voluntatis* (Brentano 1952: 235; Engl. trans.: 147).³ The former is the action that you desire to bring about; the latter is your act of will itself. As we will see, Brentano’s extended discussion of the determinism-indeterminism debate is mostly about the *actus elicited voluntatis*.

Determinism and Empiricism

The most striking feature of the mature Brentano’s approach to free will is its uncompromising determinism.⁴ A crucial aspect of this determinism is what could be called

² The distinction between “descriptive” and “genetic” (or “physiological”) psychology is central to Brentano’s epistemology. The latter states laws that apply to the “succession of mental phenomena.” The former’s task is to clarify psychological concepts. See Brentano (1982) and my comments in Seron (2017).

³ This distinction is drawn from Aquinas. See *Summa Theologiae*, Part II-1, Quest. 6, Art. 4, and the helpful comments in McInerney (1992: 20 ff.).

⁴ Brentano seems to have embraced some form of indeterminism in his first writings. See Kraus’ note in Brentano (1925: 291; Engl. trans.: 254). In his later work, he himself presents his view as a form of “determinism.” In the contemporary terminology, however, it would be better seen as a form of compatibilism (Kane 1985: 9; Krantz 1999: 265), insofar as it does not deny all moral freedom. Despite his determinism, Brentano actually agrees with the following three theses: (1) the action is free within certain limits; (2) the will is free in the sense of not being subject to compulsion (no one can compel us to will anything); (3) the will is free

Brentano's "actualism" – an epistemological view which follows from his radical empiricism (another aspect, his so-called necessitarianism, will be considered later on). At first glance, it seems natural to think that the free will issue has to do with the possibility or impossibility to act or will otherwise than we actually do. Our will is said to be free insofar as we could, at least in some cases, want to act differently. But Brentano rejects this idea – which he attributes to Descartes (Brentano 1952: 242; Engl. trans.: 151). The reason for this is that, at a more general level, he considers reference to possible events incompatible with his empiricism. Thus, he heavily criticizes how John Stuart Mill's appeals to "possibilities" in order to dispense with the non-empirical assumption of real things beyond appearances (Brentano 1930: 130; Engl. trans.: 77).

In his critique of indeterminism, Brentano repeatedly emphasizes that, since merely possible volitions are not given in experience, no empirical argument can support the indeterminist's principle of alternative possibilities:

It is just as impossible for the determinists to perceive that we cannot do otherwise as for the indeterminists to perceive that we can. Only concrete facts can be perceived; not possibilities, impossibilities, or necessities. (Brentano 1952: 269; Engl. trans.: 167)

The indeterminist contends that we are not determined to will this or that, and that this indetermination of the will is empirically evident. In other words: immediate consciousness, that is, inner perception, tells us that (at least when the opposite motives are of equal weight) we are able to will the opposite of what we are willing now. To this, Brentano objects that "we can only perceive what is actual, not what is merely possible" (Brentano 1952: 246; Engl. trans.: 154). Knowledge of possibility is derivative, that is, acquired on the basis of the experience of what is actual. But how could the indeterminist validly infer that she can will non-A from her experience that she wills A?

In the same vein, an argument in favor of indeterminism may be that "our will occasionally withstands a passionate desire with resolution and energy, but then leaves off the battle in a state of exhaustion, only to renew its resistance after a pause" (Brentano 1952: 251; Engl. trans.: 156). In such cases, it seems that the will is not determined, but resists motives that

in the sense of "self-determination," that is, in the sense that "we are not so totally determined by external circumstances that our self is not a causal factor" (Brentano 1952: 236 ff.; Engl. trans.: 147 ff.).

would determine it if it didn't resist them. Brentano's objection to this argument is that no experience can ever support it and hence that it is purely fictional. What does the indeterminist mean when she says that the will struggles against desires? She cannot have in view here the (present) act of will, for the act of will must come after the motives and thus does not exist yet. Does "the will" denote the ability to will? The ability to will is not the sort of thing that can act or offer a resistance to anything: "It is simply a potentiality." Hence, Brentano concludes, the correct interpretation is not that the will battles against the motives, but that "one motive battles against another."⁵

Two points should be noted before we move into a closer discussion of Brentano's determinism. First, Brentano constantly assumes that, if the free will dispute makes sense, then it can and must be resolved on the basis of experience alone. It is worth noticing that the same concern prompted Brentano to warn against the use of abstract phrasings such as "I have overcome my passion" or "My inclination to do my duty overcame my leanings towards pleasure." Because abstracta are no more than fictions, we should say instead: "One part of myself gained a victory over another part of myself" (Brentano 1952: 251; Engl. trans.: 156). Second, Brentano's empirical approach to free will does not involve abandoning all talk of dispositions as nonsensical. The key point is rather that, since habits and inclinations cannot be perceived, but only derived from perceptual experience (Brentano 1968: 119, 238-9; Engl. trans.: 93, 172), they have no (empirical) reality except insofar as they function as actual motives for actual actions.⁶

Brentano's Demonstration of Determinism

Brentano provides a detailed demonstration of determinism in his Vienna lectures on ethics. The issue at stake concerns the will rather than action. By determinism, Brentano means the

⁵ This view bears close similarities with Leibniz's critique of the liberty of indifference (Leibniz 1990, §47: 195 ff.). Leibniz, like Brentano, claims that we resist our bad inclinations and thus "become masters of ourselves" not by the power of the will, but by "methods and stratagems" that help us enforce other inclinations and give them the upper hand. I thank Basil Vassilicos for this reference.

⁶ Brentano makes this objection to the Freudian unconscious in Brentano (1968: 238-9; Engl. trans.: 172): "It is true that some have denied the existence of these unconscious dispositions and have instead postulated unconscious acts which only occasionally re-emerge into consciousness, but this is bad psychology."

view that the will is causally determined. Thus, he seems to take it for granted that, within certain limits that are fixed by internal and external conditions, the *actus a voluntate imperatus* is free (Brentano 1952: 235 ff.; Engl. trans.: 147 ff.). In short: you can do what you want, within certain limits. Brentano's contention is that not the willed action, but the will itself is causally determined. A second point to keep in mind is that the determinism-indeterminism dispute is not about freedom in general, but only about freedom in the sense of being "free from necessity" (Brentano 1952: 235; Engl. trans.: 147). The question is whether the *actus elicited voluntatis* – the act of will – is "necessarily determined," that is, caused in such a way that its cause is not the will itself and that it makes it necessary for it to be so and so.

The third part of the Vienna lectures is devoted to establishing successively that indeterminism is very improbable (Brentano 1952: 276 ff.; Engl. trans.: 172 ff.), that it lacks explanatory power (Brentano 1952: 279 ff.; Engl. trans.: 173 ff.), and that it is necessarily false. I shall here restrict myself to the final argument.

Brentano distinguishes between an extreme and a moderate form of indeterminism. The former is the view that the will simply has no cause. The latter holds that the will has no cause that makes it necessary (Brentano 1952: 267; Engl. trans.: 166). The moderate indeterminist admits that the will may be determined, but denies that it is determined *necessarily* (Brentano 1952: 283; Engl. trans.: 175). In Brentano's view, both extreme and moderate indeterminism thus defined involve the assumption of an "absolute accident," that is, of something that is not necessarily determined. Brentano's aim is to demonstrate that this assumption is self-contradictory (Brentano 1952: 281 ff.; Engl. trans.: 174 ff.). His argument takes the form of a *reductio ad absurdum* and runs as follows:

(1) As an empiricist, Brentano requires his determinism as well as his critique of indeterminism to be empirically grounded. If determinism holds that the will is causally determined, then necessary causal relations must be somehow accessible to experience. Let us first consider causality. Brentano agrees with Hume that *outer* experience does not make us directly acquainted with anything such as causation, and hence that physical causality is no more than a relation of temporal antecedence between events. However, unlike Hume, he claims that we do experience causal relations in *inner* perception. Brentano cites inference and will as examples of such relations (Brentano 1952: 283; Engl. trans.: 175). Your act of

drawing a conclusion based on premises is caused by previous acts of judgment; your act of willing something as a means is caused by your act of willing the end it is a means to.

(2) Inner perception teaches us that these causal relations are such that, if a process A causes another process B, then B is made necessary by A. A conclusion necessarily follows from given premises; a volition necessarily derives from other volitions. That is why both are amenable to *a priori* treatment: volitions are subject to genetic laws that are the “main psychological foundations of ethics;” acts of reasoning are subject to genetic laws that provide the “principal psychological foundations of logic” (Brentano 1925: 67-68, 109; Engl. trans.: 224, 253). Since it is conceptually true that the effect *must* take place when the cause occurs, the concept of a non-necessitating cause is self-contradictory. Therefore, “moderate indeterminism contradicts itself when it says that motives are causes that can bring about acts of will, but need not necessarily do so” (Brentano 1952: 283; Engl. trans.: 175).

(3) Accordingly, the only option left to the indeterminist is to endorse the stronger view that the will has no cause whatsoever, namely extreme indeterminism. But Brentano claims to demonstrate that this latter view, too, involves contradiction. More generally, Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason – the “law of causality” to the effect that it is impossible for something to exist out of nothing – is an analytic truth. Brentano’s demonstration proceeds (very roughly) as follows (Brentano 1952: 287 ff.; Engl. trans. 177 ff.; Brentano 1970: 137 ff.):

(3a) “Something is” is necessarily equivalent to “something is present.” (3b) Necessarily, everything that is (present) is subject to *continuous* temporal changes. In Brentano’s terms, this means that everything that is must be a beginning, an end, or an inner border of a time lapse, and that between beginning and end there must always be some interval, however small: nothing can abruptly begin and end at the same time. (3c) Brentano then asks us to imagine a white dot on a black table, and to suppose that it is contingent absolutely speaking. Then, there is no necessity for the dot to exist, and it is even much more likely to cease to exist, a moment later. But if so, the dot is both beginning and end at the same time – which is

assumed to be impossible. Therefore, the concept of an “absolute accident” and hence extreme indeterminism are self-contradictory.⁷

(4) Since both extreme and moderate indeterminism are necessarily false and are the only possible forms of indeterminism, determinism is necessarily true.

Obviously, the argument is controversial in many respects. First, even supposing that, as claimed in step (2), causality involves necessity, one may object, following Thomas Reid, that motives are not efficient causes and that a motive, by its nature, does not make the motivated action or volition necessary, with the consequence that the agent can be regarded as morally responsible even though determinism is false and her actions and volitions are contingent. Brentano, however, does not take the objection seriously and considers the motive-cause distinction as a sophism:

To be sure, Thomas Reid thought we ought to distinguish between motives and causes, for motives can move us to act, but cannot themselves act. But was this anything more than a mere sophism? If motives impel us to action, they are clearly working in conjunction with other factors; that is, determining along with other factors. Hence, as motives, they are operative causes of the will. (Brentano 1952: 262; Engl. trans.: 163-4)

Secondly, all of the first three steps are supposed to be intuitively evident on the basis of inner perception. This entails, for Brentano, that they are necessary in virtue of the empirical concepts being used. For example, Brentano views the “law of causality” as an analytic judgment, that is, as deriving from the analysis of concepts abstracted from experience. It is all but clear, however, why inner perception supports the law of causality, or the view that causality involves necessity, and not the indeterminist’s alternative possibilities view.

⁷ Brentano’s indeterminism can be regarded as a consequence of his metaphysical “necessitarianism.” Brentano’s temporal argument in favor of his necessitarianism poses some technical difficulties that are discussed in Nathan (1971). Its discussion by Nathan is however flawed in some respects, because Nathan ignores the fact that the kind of necessity Brentano actually has in mind is analytic necessity. For discussion on the “law of causality” and its metaphysical or theological implications, see also Janssen (2012: 250 ff.).

An Ethics of *Bildung*

An objection Brentano considers crucial is that the determinist runs the risk of falling into a kind of fatalism. What Brentano calls “fatalism” is either the view that actions are entirely independent of the will, or the view that actions are dependent on the will but that the will itself is determined by the *character* conceived of as a set of inclinations that are given once for all. Brentano attributes the former – “pure or Asiatic fatalism” – to Oedipus and the latter – “modified fatalism” – to Schopenhauer (Brentano 1952: 261; Engl. trans.: 162-3). The problem with fatalism is that it absolves us from any moral responsibility for our actions and thus “throttles all effort and ambition” (Brentano 1952: 245; Engl. trans. 153): the will either has no control over actions, or is innately determined to will this or that. Since modified fatalism involves the view that the will is necessarily determined, it is tempting to think that the same problem arises for determinism as well. But Brentano claims that the objection does not hold up to scrutiny, or at least that it does not compel us to embrace indeterminism.

In fact, Brentano’s variety of determinism differs not only from pure fatalism by maintaining that actions are dependent on the will, but also from modified fatalism in its denial that the character is entirely innate and out of the will’s control. In opposition to both pure and modified fatalism, Brentano claims that “not only our behavior but also our character is partially dependent upon our will” (Brentano 1952: 261; Engl. trans.: 163). To recapitulate: pure fatalism is the view that the will does not determine action; modified fatalism holds that the will determines action, that it is determined by the character, and that the character is not determined by the will; Brentano’s determinism holds that the will determines action, that it is determined by the character, and that the character is determined by the will.

Brentano is quite emphatic on this latter point, which he takes to be decisive. In his estimation, the idea that the character is determined by the will is a knock-down argument not only against fatalism, but against indeterminism as well. Indeed, by denying that inclinations causally determine the will, the indeterminist, too, must hold that we have no control over our will and thus that every effort to improve it is useless. Whether determined by immutable inclinations or not determined at all, our will remains something we have no causal influence over. Thus, the agent cannot be held as responsible for her action; she is “not the actor, but merely the stage upon which the act takes place” (Brentano 1952: 280; Engl. trans.: 174). In

this sense, indeterminism “is the doctrine that the will is not free” (Brentano 1952: 280; Engl. trans.: 173-174).

By contrast, Brentano’s view is that, since our will is causally determined by our inclinations, we do possess the power to improve it by improving our inclinations, i.e., our character. This leads him to propose what we may call an ethics of *Bildung*. Determinism, as Brentano sees it, holds not only that the will is determined by motives, but also that “it is the necessary result of the circumstances at hand and of our intrinsic disposition, which is constructed primarily by previous exercises of the will” (Brentano 1952: 265; Engl. trans.: 165). The underlying idea is this: the will has some influence on the motives that causally determine it; therefore it can indirectly act upon itself through exercise and self-discipline. Taking up Aristotle’s concept of habit as a “second nature” (Brentano 1952: 261; Engl. trans.: 163), Brentano claims that it is in our power “to work on our character by forming (*Bildung*) good habits or by improving our natural inclinations” (Brentano 1952: 265; Engl. trans.: 165). Of course, such effort towards self-improvement would make no sense if determinism were false, that is, if our character and inclinations did not somehow determine our will and, hence, our actions.

This entails that education as well as all forms of self-improvement through practice must play a prominent role in moral life as Brentano conceives it. For example, asceticism should not be practiced as an end in itself, but only as a means of learning moderation (Brentano 1952: 384; Engl. trans.: 234; also 237-8; Engl. trans.: 147).⁸ Likewise, Brentano makes a plea for “good manners” as a means to self-improvement:

Good manners can also be regarded as a practice ground; we ought to maintain them even where neglecting them would give no offence – even, indeed, when we are alone. Bear in mind the story of the Englishman who always changed for dinner, even though he was the only white man living among the natives. We ought to take care about our clothing even at home, for such matters should become second nature. (Brentano 1952: 384-5; Engl. trans.: 234-5)

Finally, education is given a central place in Brentano’s account. Indeed, a modified fatalist may object that Brentano’s argument is somehow circular: the effort towards self-improvement itself needs to be willed and thus motivated accordingly, with the consequence

⁸ See Brentano’s distich in Brentano (1955: 168; Engl. trans.: 107): “If you lust after pleasure it stays out of reach: / But it comes on its own if you strive for the best.”

that you cannot make such effort unless you already have good inclinations. The objection falls away, however, if good inclinations can be acquired through education. As Brentano puts it, one's will can influence not only one's own thoughts and affects, but also "the powers of other people" (Brentano 1952: 236; Engl. trans.: 147).

Concluding Remarks

To conclude with: Brentano presents his determinism as fully compatible with both the law of causality and the view that we are morally perfectible and responsible for our actions. In fact, his claim is even stronger, since he maintains that determinism is the only way to make sense of our moral perfectibility and responsibility. Brentano proposes an interesting variant of virtue ethics based on the idea of self-improvement. Opposing the view that moral life consists in resisting inclinations that would otherwise cause the agent to act badly, he asks us to conceive of the will as being necessarily determined by inclinations and having to strive actively to improve them through self-discipline.

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