

Book Review

Brentano's Immanent Realism and Beyond

Albertazzi, L. (2006): *Immanent Realism. An Introduction to Brentano*. Springer, Netherlands. ISBN 1-402-04201-9 (Euro 139.-; hbk)

In his tale *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, Borges (1944/1969) wrote: “It is no exaggeration to state that there is only one discipline, that of psychology” in the classical culture of Tlön. This statement would not have displeased Franz Brentano who never believed in the compartmentalization of different branches of knowledge. On the contrary, throughout his long life he passionately pursued the goal of a unified and original approach to psychology encompassing the ontology of the world. At the same time he rejected all forms of mentalism or idealism. Psychology, according to Brentano, is not the same as the idealistic mind of the Cartesian tradition but something much more empirical and much less committed to any *a priori* ontology.

Liliana Albertazzi's recent book presents Brentano's life and work in an unmatched synthesis of clarity and richness. Albertazzi's accomplishment is the result of her life-long acquaintance with Brentano's work and with those fields of inquiry that were crucial to the German philosopher and psychologist – psychology, perception, and philosophy. The book is fascinating because of its content, pleasurable because of its style, and unique in its cross-combination of historical and theoretical perspectives.

Albertazzi's book succeeds in clarifying the many misunderstandings that have clouded Brentano's image. Unfortunately for most cognitive scientists, Brentano is known only for his famous and often misinterpreted quotation about the relation between intentionality and the mental. Brentano occupies a unique position insofar as he was at the beginning of several alternative approaches: existentialism, phenomenology, psychology, psychophysics, philosophy of mind, and analytical philosophy. Yet his main goal was to avoid any intellectual or conceptual trench. Brentano's position is far too important to remain a roughly sketched philosophical silhouette.

The upsurge of interest in intentionality since the 1980s was triggered by several biased approaches to Brentano. An important thread had begun earlier with Chisholm's analytical perspective based on a representational interpretation of neo-platonic tenor. It was revived in the 1980s by a series of well-known philosophers and cognitive scientists (e.g., Searle 1983, Dennett 1987, Lyons 1995) who felt free to present their own adaptations of Brentano's standpoint. One of the great merits of Albertazzi's

book is to uncover the original thought of Brentano without any bias due to partial viewpoints. Brentano's life and work emerge from the almost 400 pages of the book in all their complexity.

There are books that must be read and books that are a pleasure to read. This book is both. The author displays Brentano's life and multiple conceptual threads in front of the reader page after page. The book is a cornucopia of carefully selected information. For example, Albertazzi quotes the letter to Kraus where Brentano (1905) states a crystal clear anti-representationalist and anti-idealist stance: "It has never been my view that the *immanent* object is identical with 'object of thought'. What we think about is *the object* or *thing* and not the 'object of thought'." Brentano has often been confused with the phenomenological tradition that actually originated from his students Husserl, Meinong, Stumpf, Twardowski – a confusion that earned him the accusation of psychologism.

There is a *fil rouge* that links Brentano's life, his work and the title of this book. Brentano, like his beloved Aristotle, was fundamentally a realist. He did not believe in reducing reality to abstractions. He preferred to analyze empirically the structure of intentional reference instead of developing a metaphysical system for intentionality. Indeed, the term "empirical" figured prominently in the title of his main work *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkte* (*Psychology from an Empirical Point of View*). And yet it is of the utmost importance to understand Brentano's meaning of this term. His approach was truly unbiased by any assumption (Cartesian, physicalist, functionalist, or other) about the nature of the psyche that later hampered the research in the fields of psychology and philosophy of mind.

Brentano's insistence on Aristotle was, among other reasons, due to the need of finding roots that differed from the idealism originating in the Cartesian tradition and later developed in the German tradition. Such different roots made Brentano's legacy difficult to understand. They were skillfully developed by the analytical tradition embraced by most of the English speaking world during the second half of the 20th century. Furthermore, the linguistic turn of many philosophers deepened the chasm between Brentano's empirical point of view and the accepted epistemology. As Albertazzi severely comments at the very end of her book (p. 340): "From Brentano's viewpoint, the choice taken in the twentieth century to rely on language even for ontological inquiries is utterly wrong". We can thus understand why Brentano's doctrine struggled to "conciliate the presence of an often *irreducible transcendent foundation* of perception with its *immanent and equally irreducible categorization* by the intentional acts" (p. 128). It is astonishing that in many other works on Brentano there are few, if any, references (McAlister 1977, Jacquette 2004) to the immanent realism which is the hallmark of Brentano's work.

Currently, a new awareness of the critical roots of many problems is beginning to emerge after too many years of unabashed scientific orthodoxy. Not only have new empirical data become available, but there is also a growing need for a critical rethinking of the fundamental bases of psychology and philosophy of mind. It is thus timely to rediscover an accurate picture of Brentano's work – his anti-representationalism, his analysis of intentional reference (and not intentionality), his attempt at utilizing the Aristotelian framework to provide a ground for psychological inquiry not biased by Cartesianism, his painstaking effort at grounding psychology from an empirical point of view. In the last decades, an ever increasing interest in consciousness has struggled to develop a feasible scientific approach. The mind (I would be tempted to say “psyche”) is considered to be one of the most important topics of contemporary research (Jennings 2000, Miller 2005). Albertazzi's view of Brentano's work provides the starting point for a convincing alternative strategy.

Particularly interesting in this respect is Brentano's analysis of the relation between act and object, and his caution in assuming anything regarding the nature of the subject. As Albertazzi points out, Brentano does not develop a theory of intentionality. He analyzes the structure of intentional reference and the relation between act and object. One of the conceptual nodes of his approach is “the unitariness of act and object of intentional presentation as a single psychic phenomenon” (p. 205). This is one of the crucial issues raised by Brentano and regards the nature of presentation itself which is the keystone of his view. What is a presentation and, thus, what is an intentional reference? Which structure does it have? To grasp these questions and what they imply allows a true understanding of Brentano's sophisticated realism which holds that objects of intentional presentations are things which are real, concrete and immediately given with evidence.

At the same time, this indicates the conceptual focus where it is possible to conceive an empirical approach to the psyche. It is the place where, according to Albertazzi's interpretation, it is possible to develop a theory of knowledge and a scientific (empirical) metaphysics. As Albertazzi writes (p. 214), “for Brentano, that which *exists in the strict sense* is only the *psychic act* of the *concrete presentation* in the actual present: that is actual processes”. Albertazzi's analysis of the twofold valence of the intentional act highlights the presence of two objects of reference and of a twofold direction, both inside the intentional act.

A further important point is the critique of the notion of the physical, which has also been a source of misunderstanding of Brentano. The notion of the physical in the modern sense is meaningful only assuming a domain opposite to pure mental entities. Brentano, despite his wrongly ascribed mentalism, could not have been further from such a view. He continued to adhere to the empirical stance that characterized his work

throughout his life. It is interesting to observe that the modern notion of the physical, initiated in the 17th century as a result of the ontological revolution led by Galileo, Descartes, and Locke, is currently being challenged by many authors from completely different fields (quantum theory, process philosophy, philosophy of mind, ontology). Regarding this issue, Albertazzi observes that “as Brentano had constantly argued since 1874, ‘physical’ phenomena are nothing but ‘the object of intentional reference’. They are therefore objects internal to the field of the presentational continuum” (pp. 272–273). Parallel to the question of the nature of intentional reference there is, thus, the question of the nature of physical reality, and ultimately the two questions become subjected to the same empirical approach. Brentano’s “presentational continuum” becomes the empirical horizon from which ontology and phenomenology originate – the two being different perspectives on the same flow of events. Brentano could not be further from either a mentalistic or idealistic standpoint or a naive physicalism.

Although not within the scope of the book, it would be extremely interesting to carry on a comparison between the legacy of Brentano’s thought and many of his contemporaries who developed approaches aimed at a somehow similar empirical stance. I refer here to the (often equally misunderstood and poorly known) work by Avenarius (1888), Mach (1886), and, from a different point of view, the direct realism expounded by Holt (1914). It would be equally interesting to compare Brentano’s view with that of the late James whose work was moving towards a neutral ground beyond the physical and the mental, thereby rejecting the traditional framework of thinking (James 1908/1996). Finally, another thread that could prove fruitful is the relation to process philosophy – for instance, the surprising similarities between Brentano’s “intentional act” and “object” and Whitehead’s “prehension” and “actual occasion”.

Where Brentano’s work would have gone – had Brentano been free from obtuse and short-sighted academic manoeuvres – can be guessed by reading the too short final chapter of Albertazzi’s book where she expresses her views about viable directions of future research. Brentano’s immanent realism could foster an empirical program of research furnishing new ground for a series of disciplines ranging from artificial intelligence to the philosophy of mind. According to Albertazzi (p. 338): “Immanent realism seems to be one of the few ways out of reductionism upwards (representationalism) or downwards (neurophysiology), in which research on consciousness today” could progress. “What is lacking, is a theory of the types and levels of representation, from concrete to symbolic and of the relations among them” (p. 338).

The underlying theme behind both Brentano’s work and Albertazzi’s book is similar: finding a common ground based on a truly empirical approach that bridges the gap between science and metaphysics, between

psychology and physics. This unity is the hallmark of Albertazzi's approach to Brentano and it cannot be stated more convincingly than by one of the twenty-five *Habilitationsthesen* presented by the young Brentano (1866/1969): "*Veræ philosophiæ methodus nulla alia nisi scientiæ naturalis est*".

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