THE INTENTIONALITY THESIS AND ITS DEVELOPMENTS:
FROM BRENTANO TO MEINONG, HUSSERL, EHRENFELS AND MALLY

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According to Otto Neurath and Rudolf Haller, philosophy in Austria in the 19th and early 20th had a very special character, and it is one of the main roots of modern analytic philosophy: It was open to the sciences, it was anti-idealistic and realistic in its ontological tendencies, it had an empiricist tendency and it went back to the longer influence of Catholic scholastic philosophy and the Leibniz-Wolff rationalism. This in turn has to do with the Catholicism of the Habsburg emperors, and it prevented a stronger reception of the philosophies of Kant and the German Idealists. Barry Smith proposed an addition to this thesis: The central figure for this so-called “Austrian philosophy” was Franz Brentano (1838-1917); he served as a professor in Vienna from 1874 to 1880 and then as a private docent till 1895. Personally, I have certain doubts in detail about the Neurath-Haller thesis (which I cannot elaborate in this short paper), but it cannot reasonably be doubted that Brentano – personally as well as via his prominent pupils – was one of the most influential philosophers in European philosophy of all times. It is true that one important root of analytic philosophy is the Austro-Polish one which essentially goes back to Brentano, his pupils (like Meinong and Twardowski) and second-generation pupils (like Mally, Łukasiewicz, and Tarski). Furthermore, Brentano’s influence contributed to the appointment of Ernst Mach as professor in Vienna, and this endorsed a science-friendly climate among philosophers and a broader audience. Interestingly, also the phenomenological movement – today often seen in harsh opposition to analytic philosophy – originates in Brentano and his school. Edmund Husserl writes that without his teacher Brentano, he would not have turned into a philosopher, and even Martin Heidegger – the paradigm anti-analytic philosopher – confesses that without reading Brentano’s first book on Aristotle he would not have

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written a line of philosophy. Brentano is often perceived as a philosopher, but he is regularly mentioned also in textbooks on psychology as one of the fathers of modern psychology: Unlike his predecessors, Brentano defined psychology as the science of the psychic or mental phenomena, and not the science of the soul. He thereby paved the way to modern, empirical psychology.

Brentano’s most prominent and best-known piece of doctrine is the so-called “intentionality thesis”. But interestingly, this thesis underwent various modifications and also misunderstandings: it was modified by the late Brentano himself, it was modified by some of his prominent pupils, and it was heavily misunderstood by a good part of the Brentano reception from the 1970s onwards. Nevertheless, it proved fruitful for subsequent philosophical thought in many respects. My plan for this paper is this:

In section 1, I will sketch a portrait of Brentano as a philosopher; in section 2, I want to explain the intentionality thesis as it was understood by the early Brentano and demarcate it from some misunderstandings, and in sections 3 to 7 I’ll give a brief survey of what developed out of this thesis among his pupils and second-generation-pupils.

Even if controversial and sometimes misunderstood, the intentionality thesis stood at the beginning of very different philosophical projects.

1. Franz Brentano – a brief portrait of a difficult figure

Brentano displays the features of a typically “Austrian” philosopher only to a certain extent: He was definitely influenced by Aristotle, Leibniz and the Catholic Neo-Scholasticism, but he got this orientation already in Germany, beginning as a schoolboy when he read Thomas Aquinas and then during his university studies. He came from Germany to Vienna in 1874 at a time when his principal works were already written: two books on Aristotle and the first volume of the Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint. He was definitely open to the natural sciences: In his fourth habilitation thesis, he claimed that the true method of philosophy was no other than the method of the natural sciences, but he was in no way a naturalist or a defender of any kind of scientism like the Vienna Circle. “The method of the natural sciences” meant for him just an empirically founded procedure of deduction and induction, very different in any case from the speculations of the German Idealists which he strongly opposed. Concerning realism
and objectivism, Brentano took a difficult stance: On the one hand, he was indeed a strong realist and objectivist, in ethics as well as in ontology, on the other hand he held that all philosophy had to start from introspection, that means the inner perception of our mental life. Clearly, such a position runs into a sort of “bridging the gap” problems: How can we secure that our mental phenomena display the external world correctly? Brentano applied various ways to fill the gap: In ethics, but also elsewhere, he strongly used the idea of evident correctness: There is something like evidently correct loving or hating. In ontology, epistemology and philosophy of religion, he often works with probabilities and inferences to the best explanation: The best and most probable explanation for our perceptions is the existence of an external world, the most probable explanation for the structures in the world is the existence of God.

Brentano's immense influence cannot go back to his few published books. Indeed, Brentano published little in his lifetime. After 1874, Brentano seemed to suffer under an inability to finish bigger texts. He re-thought problems again and again, modified his positions again and again, and so a big part of his work is only accessible via his unpublished manuscripts. Some fields in Brentano's thought, e.g. ontology, are extremely hard to understand since he repeatedly changed his opinions, sometimes within weeks or months. Many of those manuscripts were published only posthumously by some editors, but partly in a questionable style: Some of the editors combine older and younger texts, and some have a tendency to propagate the opinions of the late Brentano. Hence, these opinions are interpreted into the earlier texts, and the result is sometimes confusing.6 A historico-critical edition, which hopefully manages to avoid these problems, is currently in the making, a few volumes have already appeared. A little indication of the difficulties to get an overall picture of Brentano is the fact that there is to the present day no bigger and comprehensive account of his philosophy.7 There are numerous studies on special topics and a couple of brief overviews, but as far as I know, nobody has risked so far to write a broad, balanced monograph about the whole thought of Brentano. Especially his philosophy of religion is widely overlooked.

Why, then, was Brentano so influential? It was not via his books, but rather via his own personality and his pupils, and the pupils of these
pupils in turn. I mentioned names like Meinong, Husserl and Twardowski before as direct disciples, and Heidegger, Tarski, Mally, and Łukasiewicz as indirect pupils. But there are many others. One example is Carl Stumpf, one of the founders of modern psychology, who was among his first students in Würzburg, another one is Thomas Masaryk, the later president of Czechoslovakia who provided for a Brentano archive at Prague to save his writings. According to personal recollections, Brentano must have been an absolutely impressive and fascinating personality as a teacher and philosopher, and especially his detailed, step-by-step style of analysis and his frequent rethinking of problems seems to have fascinated his audience. A rather controversial feature of his personality, however, seems to have been his intolerance towards other standpoints, especially towards former disciples who changed their minds, like Meinong and Husserl. Interestingly, both of these former disciples developed their alternative positions out of the same piece of doctrine, namely the intentionality thesis. And this is the topic of the following section.

2. Brentano’s intentionality thesis

I mentioned before that Brentano is among the fathers of modern psychology by defining it as the science of the psychic or mental phenomena. This in turn led him to the question how such phenomena could be defined. After discussing a couple of inappropriate attempts, Brentano proposes his famous definition which has been cited again and again:

Every mental phenomenon is characterized by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object, and what we might call, though not wholly unambiguously, reference to a content, direction towards an object (which is not to be understood here as meaning a thing), or immanent objectivity. Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself, although they do not all do so in the same way. In presentation something is presented, in judgement something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired and so on. This intentional in-existence is characteristic exclusively of mental phenomena. No physical phenomenon exhibits anything like it. We could, therefore, define mental phenomena by saying that they are those phenomena which contain an object intentionally within themselves(1).

All mental phenomena, so we learn, display a certain directedness
or “aboutness”, they are directed to an immanent object. It is this claim which can duly be labeled as “the intentionality thesis” or the “Brentano thesis”.

Some clarifications are in place here. Firstly, “intentional” has nothing to do with “intentions” here, in the sense of purposes or goals of action. By using the word “intentional”, Brentano refers to an old scholastic term “intentio” which was probably a translation from the Arabic. Etymologically, this Arabic word meant something like stretching a bow: Just as a stretched bow with the arrow is directed to something, the intentional mental phenomenon is directed to something.

Secondly, “in-existence” is to be taken literally here: It does not mean non-existence, but really “existence-in”. The intended object exists in the mental phenomenon, as the last sentence in my quotation makes clear.

Thirdly, we may really take Brentano’s words at face value: The object exists-in the mental phenomenon, it is a sort of inner object. Brentano clearly calls it an immanent object and says that it “is not to be understood here as meaning a thing” (see above). This sounds very counterintuitive and unnatural at first glance: If I wish to eat strawberries, I wish to eat real strawberries and not only inner, mental strawberries. Does this mean that Brentano is a projectionist or phenomenalist?

Not really. Peter Simons once called Brentano a “methodological phenomenalist”, and quite rightly so. We have to recall Brentano’s general understanding of philosophy and his concept of “phenomenon” in order to understand this. I said in section 1 that Brentano sees the introspection of our mental life or, as he calls it, the “descriptive psychology” as the starting platform of philosophy. Philosophers deal with “phenomena”, and these in turn fall into mental and physical phenomena. A look at physical phenomena can be the key to our problem: Physical phenomena, according to Brentano, are not material things and the like, but really “phenomena” in the sense of appearances, or that which occurs in our mind. In Brentano’s own words:

“Examples of physical phenomena [...] are a color, a figure, a landscape which I see, a chord which I hear, warmth, cold, odor which I sense; as well as similar images [in German: Gebilde] which appear in imagination”.

The italicized passages make clear that Brentano does not equate physical phenomena with physical objects in the external world. Physical phenomena are not the colored objects, but rather the seen colors etc. According to Brentano, what we have as the input
material for philosophy is phenomena, occurrences in our mind, and they can be physical or mental. What is behind these phenomena, whether there is an external world etc., is yet another question. One could say that at the outset, Brentano is neutral as regards ontological claims, similarly to Ernst Mach or later Edmund Husserl. We might now understand the peculiarity of mental phenomena: In contrast to mental phenomena, physical phenomena in Brentano's sense lack that aboutness, directedness or intentionality. A figure or landscape that I see is not directed towards something, but a wish or a judgment is.

Nevertheless, Brentano has been misunderstood in various ways. Some commentators mistakenly believed that Brentano divides the world into mental and physical objects, i.e. they take his definitions as an ontological claim (as which it was not meant). A second misunderstanding is that intentionality is directed towards external objects. Of course, this interpretation may sound natural and plausible, but Brentano’s text in the Psychology of 1874 is simply against it. The intentional object is an inner, an immanent object. This misunderstanding is frequent in the literature since there was a lot of discussion in the Brentano School and the later Brentano ultimately changed his mind in that context. It is also interesting to consider what appears as “Brentano’s problem” or “Brentano’s thesis” in the literature: Sometimes, “Brentano’s thesis” seems to be that mental phenomena can never be reduced to physical objects, sometimes it seems to be that physical phenomena are never intentional, and sometimes “Brentano’s problem” seems to be how mental phenomena can be directed towards external objects, etc.. All that, however, was not Brentano’s primary concern. His primary concern was to find a suitable definition for mental phenomena.

Another related point which would become influential is Brentano’s classification of mental phenomena. In the Psychology, Brentano sketches a threefold classification: Mental phenomena fall into: a) Presentations (in German: “Vorstellungen”); b) Judgments (“Urteile”); and c) Phenomena of interest (there is neither a really good German term nor an English one). Examples for such phenomena of interest are loving, hating, wishing etc. This classification was only sketchy in 1874, but in the late second volume (of 1911) Brentano elaborated it in more detail. Brentano is doing phenomenology here, and he sees the judgments and phenomena of
interest as a sort of compounds with layers similar to an onion: Every judgment contains at least one presentation, and every phenomenon of interest contains a judgment. Let us take the example that I am happy to find a door open. When I see that the door is open, I have a presentation of the open door, but it is not just an imagination: I judge that the door is indeed open. And I like it that the door is open, i.e. I have a phenomenon of interest towards the content of this judgment. I must skip the details here, but over all Brentano’s classification remains somewhat narrow like a corset, and especially the role of judgment seems to be overrated and artificial. (There seem to be many mental phenomena which are more complex than just being presentations, yet they don’t appear as judgment-like.) We shall see later on that Brentano’s pupil Meinong solved a part of this problem.


Let us now turn away from the historical and exegetical question of how to correctly interpret Brentano and turn towards a more systematic question: How should we best understand the intentionality thesis and how plausible is it? We saw before that Brentano’s reading of the thesis was somewhat surprising: According to him, the intentional object is indeed immanent. It seems more natural to expect that the intentional object is transcendent or external, that it is, so to say, “really out there”. However, both readings have their advantages. The externalist reading seems to be along with common sense: If we think of Paris and wish to see it, then we want to see the real Paris and not just a Paris in the mind, and if someone fears the neighbor’s dog, then he fears the real dog and not just an immanent dog in the mind. However, there are cases where no external object exists: If someone asks for the perfect dictionary or the present Emperor of Austria, then there is no such object. The externalist reading of the intentionality thesis gets into troubles here, but the immanentist reading can easily account for such cases. Our desire might have an immanent object with certain traits, but there need not be a corresponding real object. A first attempt to solve the problem came from Brentano’s pupil Kazimierz Twardowski, who would later return to Lemberg (today L’viv in Ukraine) and become the founder of the Lemberg-Warsaw school of logic, an important root of modern Polish
philosophy. In 1895, Twardowski proposed a distinction between the content and the object of a presentation. Every presentation has a content, but not necessarily also an object. The content of a presentation is something like linguistic meaning, and Twardowski discovered something like the modern distinction between meaning and reference here.

Inspired by Twardowski, Alexius Meinong (1853-1920) developed another, highly detailed solution in his “Theory of Objects” (Gegenstandstheorie). Meinong was born in Lemberg into a family of Austrian military nobility, but he moved to Vienna as a child and studied there with Brentano. Later on he was appointed professor at the University of Graz and founded the first laboratory of experimental psychology in Austria. It is little known that Meinong was also a quite talented composer; some of his songs (in the style of Anton Webern etc.) were performed at the Austrian Congress of Philosophy 2007. But his most influential product was his aforementioned “Theory of Objects”. It can be seen as a consequent elaboration of the externalist reading of the intentionality thesis – even with ontological consequences which might seem implausible. The basic tenet of the theory of objects is that every intentional mental phenomenon has an object, even if this object has surprising or contradictory attributes. If somebody thinks of strange objects like the golden mountain, the fountain of youth or a round square, then these objects somehow exist according to Meinong, although of course in another sense than Paris or apples exist. The philosophical price which must be paid for this solution is the introduction of different notions of being. However, this price should happily be paid according to Meinong, since the focus on existence in space and time is narrow-minded anyway. The range of objects of our interest is much wider than just material, spatio-temporal objects: We are also interested in numbers, relations like equality and inequality, similarity, subsequence, causation etc., and there is a whole successful scientific discipline dealing with non-bodily, abstract and ideal objects: Namely mathematics and geometry. To give just a few examples for Meinongian objects: The five apples in my bag exist spatiotemporally, but there is also the fiveness of them, the similarity of color between them, the genetic identity between their cells, the differences in weight between each two of them, the relation of lying side by side between them, the
relation of property between me and my apples, and much more. All these are interesting objects of our cognition, even if they don’t exist in a spatiotemporal way. Sometimes such objects even get the issue of processes before the legal court: In cases of copyright infringement it might be the similarity between real and faked handbags or the genetic identity between corn-plants which is the salient point.

Meinong’s theory of objects can be regarded as a realist, ontological transformation of the externalist reading of Brentano’s theory of intentionality. He tries to design a comprehensive table of the categories of all the objects of our cognition, and introduces different notions of existence: Things like apples exist actually, relations like similarity hold or subsist (in German: Bestehen), and contradictory or unreal things like the round square, the fountain of youth and the Golden Mountain are outside of being (außerseiend). This is the weakest form of being there; Meinong seems to hold that every grammatically correct description refers at least to an outside-of-being thing. According to Meinong, one should prepare to subscribe to the paradox that there are things which are not there – at least not in the sense of actual existence or subsistence. But not only presentations have their objects, but also judgments: Meinong calls the target-entities of judgments “Objektive”, that means object-like things.\(^1\) If I judge that it rains then “that it rains” is the “Objektive” of my judgment. “Objektive” resemble propositions or Fregean “thoughts” in many ways.

It is clear that Meinong’s theory leads to an ontologically rich or even overcrowded universe, and sometimes it was caricatured as “Meinong’s jungle”. But this idea proved extremely influential in an indirect way: Reacting to Meinong, Bertrand Russell developed his theory of definite description in the paper *On Denoting* 1905:\(^1\) It is simply not true, says Russell, that every grammatically correct denoting phrase denotes some object, even if it be a Meinongian “thin” object. Via logical analysis Russell showed that such Meinongian assumptions are unnecessary. In this way, Meinong brought an important stimulation to develop the idea of logical analysis. Currently, Meinongian ideas are seeing a certain renaissance in existence-free logics, modal logics and modal metaphysics. There are philosophers who think that postulating Meinongian objects is perhaps a way to reconstruct our discourse about possibilities, fictional objects etc.\(^1\)

But Meinong did not only work on the objects’ side of the intentionality relation. He also reflected on the various ways how intentionality could take place. Meinong’s classification of mental phenomena differs slightly from Brentano’s (I can spare you the details here), and he discovers a new form of intentional relation: The relation of assumption. Assumptions are neither presentations nor judgments nor phenomena of interest, they are something special. If I assume that I were in Hong Kong now, I do not think or judge that I am there, I do not wish or fear that I am there, but it is a special intentional act: I assume that I were there. But interestingly one can draw conclusions from assumptions. If the police assumes that Jones was the bank-robber, one can infer that he must have been out of his office at the time of the robbery, and perhaps one can check that fact. It is clear that assumptions have high relevance for mathematics and the natural sciences, but Meinong also tried to develop a theory of possibility and probability based on his doctrine of assumptions. His huge, 700 pages long treatise, however, did not receive much attention and appreciation, partly because Meinong was not able to give it a very elaborate mathematical form. This in turn might go back to Meinong’s half-blindness which disturbed his work for decades, and which might also in part explain the complicated character of many of his writings.

5. Spin-offs of the intentionality thesis (III): Husserl’s phenomenology

In the last chapter of this paper, I will just briefly sketch three other fields where Brentano’s thought turned out to be influential. The first one – Husserl’s phenomenology – will be known to many of you, the other two – Ehrenfels’ “Gestalt Theory” and Mally’s deontic logic – probably not. Or to be more exact: I presume that many of you will have come across Gestalt theories and deontic logic before in some context, but I think it is hardly known that they have an Austrian (and indirect Brentanian) root.

Edmund Husserl's most influential philosophical teachers were Carl Stumpf (a pupil of Brentano) and Brentano himself. Husserl even dedicated his first bigger book, Philosophy of Arithmetics of 1891, to his teacher. Husserl tried to base mathematics on a psychological basis, but this approach was duly accused as psychologism, and Husserl accepted this criticism: Logic and mathematics as a set of ideal and necessary truths cannot
based on psychology as a set of empirical truths about our mind. Husserl even turned into a sharp critic of psychologism now, and for that purpose he made use of Brentano’s notions of descriptive psychology, intentionality, phenomena, and evidence.\textsuperscript{1} I cannot go into the details of the various stages in Husserl's development of phenomenology,\textsuperscript{2} but at least in the early stage of descriptive phenomenology the Brentanian influence is clear. Husserl held that there is a correlation between the intentional objects (the “phenomena”) and the intentional acts, and that the phenomena determine the intentional acts (not conversely, as psychologism holds). If we are able to approach the phenomena without any prejudices, if we can step back from all the presuppositions which we normally take for granted, then the phenomena reveal themselves in their objective essence, and with a certain feeling of inner evidence. However, this evidence is not the simple, naïve attitude to the things which the pre-philosophical mind has (“the mundane attitude”, as Husserl calls it), but it must be excavated by an intellectual technique called the phenomenological method with its various reduction steps. Similar to Meinong, we can take Husserl's phenomenology as the spin-off of an objectivist, externalist reading of the intentionality thesis. How successful it was, especially, whether Husserl could solve the intersubjectivity problem, is controversial to the present day.


Christian von Ehrenfels (1859–1932) is surely the most colourful personality in our gallery of philosophers. A critical pupil of Brentano and Meinong and later professor of philosophy at Prague, he dealt with many different subjects such as philosophy of mathematics, value theory, aesthetics and psychology music, sexual ethics (he was an opponent of monogamy) and philosophy of religion (he wrote a quite speculative cosmogony), beyond that he wrote various dramas, but his best-known achievement is the so-called "Gestalt theory". A “Gestalt” (best translated perhaps as “shape” or “guise”, but mostly left untranslated) is a very special kind of Meinongian object. Let’s take Ehrenfels's own example: A melody can be sung or played by a violin or a piano, it can be transposed from, e.g., C Major to G Minor, it can be played hectically or smoothly, but it is always recognizable as this same melody. A similar example can be seen in graphics: A cartoon, a pencil drawing and a
painting display the same face or landscape. Ehrenfels distinguishes between the Gestalt and its founding elements, e.g. the tones or the color spots. The founding elements may change, yet the Gestalt (the melody or the figure) remains the same. These examples are simple and suggestive, but the exact ontological and psychological nature of “Gestalten” was a tricky and controversial issue among Meinong, Ehrenfels and many others. Brentano rejected the idea as a whole. One of Ehrenfels’ students at Prague was Max Wertheimer, who should later be one of the chief exponents of the “Berlin school” of Gestalt psychology, together with Carl Stumpf, Kurt Koffka, Wolfgang Köhler and others. The Berlin school rather saw “Gestalten” as something objectively given, whereas the “Graz school” (Ehrenfels, Meinong and others) rather saw them as products of the mind on the occasion of perceiving the founding elements.

7. Spin-offs of the Intentionality thesis (V): Mally’s deontic logic

Our last philosopher is a Brentano spin-off only in loose way. Ernst Mally (1879-1944) was assistant to Alexius Meinong and then his successor to his chair at Graz. Mally developed a considerable revision to Meinong’s theory of objects: He could avoid Meinong’s multiplicity of notions of existence, but he in turn had to pay the price of a multiplicity of kinds of properties. But this is not my main concern here, I want to draw your attention to another achievement of Mally’s: He was the first philosopher who proposed a deontic logic, that means a formal, axiomatic logical system for our discourse about what we should do. Deontic logic is a foundational discipline for modern ethics and philosophy of law, but it was developed only in the 1950s by Kanger and von Wright. But there was one predecessor: Ernst Mally. Already in 1926 he published his The Basic Laws of Ought: Elements of the Logic of Willing. Although Mally himself found many logical consequences in his system strange and there is consensus today that Mally’s system is indeed fundamentally flawed, this achievement 25 years before the others deserves mentioning. Unlike modern deontic logic which is usually conceived as a logic for actions (what we should do), Mally’s deontic logic is a logic for a certain quality of states of affairs (or Meinongian “Objektive”), namely for Objektive that should be the case. The “ought” / “das Sollen” hence is a peculiar kind of object to which we respond by certain intentional acts, for instance willing. Hence, even
Mally’s deontic logic can in a sense be seen as an indirect by-product of the intentionality thesis.

This spectrum of ideas was not meant as a defense of the intentionality thesis. Indeed, we saw many questionable aspects of it. Any attempt to base philosophy on descriptive psychology sooner or later runs into the objectivity problem, and we saw only more or less convincing solutions to it. More generally, one may ask whether the mind-world relation is really best explicated as a relation to objects. Be that as it may: I hope that my little journey across variants of the intentionality thesis showed that it was a perhaps wrong, but in any case fruitful thesis – and hence, Brentano is an extremely inspiring and important thinker.

NOTES
