

A Brief Analysis of Brentano's Definition of Intentionality

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Abstract:

Brentano's thesis of intentionality is a groundbreaking contribution, even though traces of it can be found in medieval philosophy of mind. However, it was Brentano who first introduced this concept to modern philosophers. Just as Husserl built the foundation of his phenomenology on Brentano's conception of intentionality, Brentano's influence remains significant in contemporary work on intentionality in modern cognitive science. According to Brentano's thesis, every mental representation or state must point towards the object it represents, based on its content. In other words, every mental phenomenon involves an object that exists intentionally, with reference to content, and is directed at an object. Brentano never employed the term 'intentionality'; rather, he elucidated the concept of intentionality through the use of the term 'intentional inexistence.' Consequently, it appears that Brentano's concept of intentionality is highly susceptible to misinterpretation. For this very reason, an analysis of Brentano's concept of intentionality is warranted. In this connection, this article attempts to present a brief overview of how Brentano defined intentionality.

Keywords: Intentionality, Brentano's Thesis Content, Object, Act, Intentional Inexistence.

INTRODUCTION

Franz Clemens Honoratus Hermann Josef Brentano (1838 - 1917), was an Austrian Philosopher and a significant Psychologist. He brought back scholastic Philosophy of mind by describing each mental phenomenon as intentional, with a mental inexistence of an object, though he never used the term 'intentionality' to describe his thesis. Brentano's desire to separate scientific Psychology from Physiology caused him to present the idea of intentionality by using this quality, 'intentional inexistence as the mark of the mental'¹, which was already ingrained in the Philosophy of mind at the time of the medieval period. The notion that an idea aims for an object independent of the mind, while the idea itself exists 'in the mind,' also introduces the concept of intentionality. The year 1870 is a turning point for both Psychology and Philosophy, as he took on the task of reinforcing Psychology's foundation with a strong methodology he termed 'descriptive' or empirical, and also worked to eliminate all metaphysical speculations in Philosophy. For him, Philosophy equated to metaphysics, where inductive methods and hypothesis creation could be used², and similarly, Psychology is an empirical science³. Brentano's work was shaped

¹ Introduction to the second edition, Brentano, F. (1874), McAlister, L. L. (ed.) (1973). *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, Carter Lane, London: Routledge.

²McAlister, L.L. (ed.) (1977). *The Philosophy of Brentano*, New Jersey: Humanities Press

³ ibid

by August Comte's positive Philosophy, which John Stuart Mill introduced to him, and this also aided in bringing back the concept of intentionality. While the philosophical application of this term has roots in Scholastic Philosophy, it had completely fallen out of use after the modern era, until Brentano revived the concept in 1874. From 1870, Brentano started reintroducing this age-old concept through a series of lectures on history of western Philosophy and subsequently gave a descriptive stance of this concept in *Psychology from Empirical Standpoint* (1874). The noun 'intentionality' does not refer to a thing. Rather, it means 'state of an entity' or which ontological derivation of Brentano's thesis is used to refer to the intentional inexistence of an object or more precisely, the state of being intentional. Brentano had submitted around twenty-five Latin theses⁴ covering the whole range of Philosophy, which were to be argued in German during his lectures on the history of Philosophy. In one word, Brentano's theory of intentionality articulates that every mental event encompasses some object within its scope, though this does not always occur in the same manner. In the case of a presentation, an entity is revealed; conversely, in the case of a judgment, a positive or negative claim is established regarding that specific entity.⁵

Brentano has reintroduced this concept as a thesis to set a clear and distinct bifurcation between mental and physical phenomena. Complete clarity is required in distinguishing physical data of consciousness from the class of mental phenomena because physical phenomenon which appears in the imagination sometimes may be confused with mental phenomena. Brentano argued that intentionality is a feature of our minds. It means that every mental representation or state must point towards the object it represents, based on its content. In other words, every mental phenomenon involves an object that exists intentionally, with reference to content, and is directed at an object.⁶ Brentano's definition of intentionality implies,

1. Intentionality as an exclusive characteristic of mental phenomenon⁷ :

it is exclusive because the defining feature of a mental phenomenon is that it intentionally does not exist or intentionally includes an object within itself. Brentano, as a methodological phenomenologist, bravely distinguished mental phenomena from other phenomena. In his view, the natural or empirical sciences typically focus on studying phenomena⁸, i.e. studies on the apparent nature of things. Given that appearances exist as mental representations, it is important to consider the distinctions between mental and physical phenomena before delving into the study of consciousness. Brentano, for one, supported multiple distinguishing marks⁹, such as the perspective that considers mental events as unique objects of

⁴ ibid

⁵ Ayer, A.J. (1992). *A Dictionary of Philosophical Quotations*. Blackwell Publications.

⁶ Introduction to the Second Edition, Introduction to the second edition, Brentano, F. (2009). *Psychology From an Empirical Standpoint* (L. L. McAlister, Trans.). Routledge

⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre also considered intentionality as the very nature of consciousness. Ayer, A.J. (1992). *A Dictionary of Philosophical Quotations*. Blackwell Publications.

⁸ The term 'phenomenon' or appearance of a thing which is felt in experience is often used to oppose the term 'things-in-itself' or the real nature of the thing. Brentano for example mentioned an experiment on sensation which is merely a phenomenon conducted by John Locke. See Book One, Chapter 1, section 2. Brentano, F. (2009). *Psychology From an Empirical Standpoint* (L. L. McAlister, Trans.). Routledge

⁹ Descartes distinguished mental entities as per spatiality which is neither admitted nor objected by Brentano although it is maintained that non-spatiality cannot be considered as characteristic of mental phenomena as opposed to physical phenomenon, since the external world is 'quasi-spatial' and 'quasi-temporal'. See Book Two, Section 9. Brentano, F. (2009). *Psychology From an Empirical Standpoint* (L. L. McAlister, Trans.). Routledge.

inner awareness, which can be seen as ideas or comprehensive collections of ideas to distinguish mental events, he suggested a key feature: the intentional content of an object. Every mental event incorporates something as an object within it. For illustration before election when we think about the promising candidate and will to become him elected, and after election we become satisfied for his empowerment; mental states undergo through successive intentional activities like 'willing', 'thinking', 'satisfying' which do not exist in physical realm, or even they are not related to the physical fact that whether the candidate is elected or not.

2. Intentionality as an attribute of every mental phenomenon:

one of the common characteristics which all mental phenomena have is to be perceived only through inner perception¹⁰. Brentano made a difference between inner perception and inner observation. Although all psychical entities belong to inner perception, not every psychical or mental elements is observed or noticed as an object of perception or content of experience¹¹. It is one of the reasons that Brentano classified mental phenomena into presentations, judgements and feelings, who are the companions of inner consciousness directed towards phenomena, to refer inner perception in wide sense. Likewise, mental phenomenon in its wide sense is intertwined with 'mental process', 'mental events', 'mental states', 'mental acts'¹² and so on. To Brentano, mental phenomenon is synonymous with mental state and mental act. As in the case of mental presentation, primary object is "necessarily and universally present in consciousness is with the kind of intentional inherence peculiar to presentations"¹³ and in the case of judgement and feeling secondary object¹⁴ is revealed; when it is said that intentionality is attributed to every mental phenomenon, it means it is accompanied with every kind of mental presentations, judgements and feelings.

3. Every Mental state as condition to be 'of something':

intentionality is one of the mental faculties, referred as a necessary feature of mental phenomena, which means aboutness or directedness, i.e. according to this theory, mental acts like perceiving, thinking, understanding, and believing are directed towards respective objects, always accompanied by some objects having relevant contents. Consciousness is always 'of something'; in Cartesian doubt, thought

¹⁰ Brentano made distinctive classes of phenomena which are also be inclined for inner consciousness, but it should not be asserted that inner consciousness; it may happen in a case of inattention, despite being noticed a part of unitary consciousness another unnoticed part remained. See Book Two, Chapter II. Brentano, F. (1874), McAlister, L. L. (ed.) (1973). *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, Carter Lane, London: Routledge.

¹¹ Brentano, F. (1887) Muller, B. (ed. & trans.) (1995). *Descriptive Psychology*, Fetter Lane, London: Routledge, p.129

¹² Here 'act' or 'activity' is not to be understood in the sense of action. It is better to be understood as event since 'mental activity' is used as 'reference to something as object'. See Brentano, F. (1874), McAlister, L. L. (ed.) (1973). *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, Carter Lane, London: Routledge, p.214

¹³ Brentano, F. (1874), McAlister, L. L. (ed.) (1973). *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, Carter Lane, London: Routledge, p. 207.

¹⁴ Secondary object does not mean as 'reference', rather it is used as 'mental activity' or a mentally active subject in which both primary and secondary objects are included. See Brentano, F. (1874), McAlister, L. L. (ed.) (1973). *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, Carter Lane, London: Routledge, p. 215.

about conscious doubt is 'about our existence'. In this doubt process, the certain things which are known clearly and distinctly, are 'thinking process', the subject 'I' and the object of the process 'existence of the self cannot be dubitable as the self himself is pursuing the process of doubt'. Although Descartes emphasized on only ego and cogito, despite being influenced by Descartes' method Husserl influenced by Brentano's thesis, pointed out significance of cogitata¹⁵ (intentional objects which are referents of our cogitations, which include different acts of experience) which remains as a pure residual of consciousness.

4. Intentional acts as being immanently objective:

As previously mentioned that in any circumstances, either conscious or may not be so, implicit perception is pursuant of primary and secondary objects of that perception. The expression 'intentional inexistence' which Brentano adopted not only from the scholastic Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, also in persuasion of Aristotle's book, is used in the sense of 'to exist objectively in something', i.e. the object which exists immanently. Like scholastic Philosophy the expression 'intentional inexistence' deals with the mental existence of the object in the mind. St. Thomas Aquinas used the expression for the theological purpose, "he attempted to find, through the intentional in-existence in the acts of thinking and loving, a certain analogy for the mystery of the Trinity and the procession ad intra of the World and the Spirit"¹⁶. Since misunderstanding regarding the term 'inexistence' has emerged ontological issues, in his later years, Brentano dropped the expression 'intentional inexistence' and gave emphasis on the relation of mental act to an object while characterising the act of thinking. Insertion of 'mental relation', i.e. the relation to something as an object, incorporates ontological realism rather than idealism because instead of asserting the ontological configuration of an object, it speaks only of the object with which the thinking being of a mental act is concerned.

¹⁵Husserl, E. (1913), Kersten, F. (trans.) (1983). *Ideas Pertaining To A Phenomenology And To A Phenomenological Philosophy: General Introduction To Pure Phenomenology*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.

¹⁶ Brentano, F. (1874), McAlister, L. L. (ed.) (1973). *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, Carter Lane, London: Routledge, p. 67.