

Brentano, Franz Clemens Honoratus Hermann

b. 16 January 1838, Marienberg, Germany

d. 17 March 1917, Zürich, Switzerland

Life and Work

The psychological and philosophical work of Franz Brentano is inspired by his life-long interest in Aristotelian thought, mediated by his teacher Adolf von

Trendelenburg (1802-1872). Brentano took holy orders in 1864 but withdrew from priesthood after having had difficulties with papal infallacy (1873). After this affair he worked in Vienna where many famous philosophers were his student: among others Edmund Husserl, Carl Stumpf, Anton Marty and Alexius Meinong.

Brentano's contribution to linguistics lies in his description of mental phenomena and the fundamental role of "intentionality" which characterizes these mental phenomena.

The concept "intentionality" was borrowed from medieval scholastic thinkers who discussed the intentional or mental inexistence of objects: cf. the difference between a tone and the hearing of a tone, the tone being the immanent object of the act of hearing. Thus, there is no pure object without a mental activity that determines its object or content. In Aristotle's De anima one finds already the view that a sensed object, for instance, contains the sensed object without its matter. The content of our perception of an apple is not the apple itself but its form (roundness), colour (redness, yellowness) etc. These concepts, however, are adjusted to a thing by our cognitive, perceptive and emotional possibilities. Therefore, the experience of objects on the one hand and the contribution of the mind on the other hand, viz. the attribution of qualities, are both necessary preconditions to be able to name things

red, round etc. This implies that only the relation between experienced contents -- the semantic and pragmatic dimensions -- and mental acts -- the formal or logical structure in linguistics -- gives us an, at best, probabilistic knowledge of a possible outer world. Crucial here is that intentionality presupposes a mental independence of matter but gives rise to detailed analyses of the links between names or utterances and that what is named or uttered. The content is related to what can be mentally, and therefore linguistically, named or uttered. It has no relation to a real world. Brentano's influence in European linguistics can be found in Viennese logical positivism, in phenomenological thought, in grammatical and syntactic analyses by Anton Marty and even nowadays in research on the function of intentionality in language use (John R. Searle). There is no direct link to these lines of thought but at least indirectly Brentano's analytical methods can be traced in the afore-mentioned lines of thought.

Major Works

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(1889) Vom Ursprung sittlicher Erkenntnis, Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot (engl. Transl. 1969 The Origin of Our Knowledge of Right and Wrong by R. Chisholm and E. Schneewind, London: Routledge).

Further Reading

Baumgartner, W., F.-P. Burkard (1990), "Franz Brentano - Eine Skizze seines Lebens". Internationale Bibliographie zur Österreichischen Philosophie 1982-1983, Amsterdam, Atlanta: Rodopi, 17-159.

Dix, P.G. (1966), De verhouding van de psychologie tot de wijsbegeerte in de leer van Brentano. Een studie over de achtergronden van zijn 'psychologische kenleer', Utrecht: Drukkerij de Mon (with a summary in english).

Searle, John R. (1983), Intentionality. An essay in the philosophy of mind, Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press.

Smith, B. (1994), Austrian Philosophy. The Legacy of Franz Brentano, Chicago, La Salle (Ill.): Open Court.

Spiegelberg, H. (1960), The Phenomenological Movement. A Historical Introduction, The Hague etc,: Nijhoff (3rd rev. and enl. ed. 1984).

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