

# 1 The Brentano Puzzle: An Introduction

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I would like to centre the Brentano puzzle on the problem of Brentano's invisibility. Those asked to list the principal philosophers of the nineteenth century usually reply with names like those of Nietzsche, Mach, Dilthey, Mill, Frege, Kirkegaard. Perhaps Herbart, Comte, Simmel and Marx. Sometimes Bradley, Bolzano or Lotze are remembered. Very rarely, the name of Brentano is mentioned. Given this state of affairs, one should consider whether the call for a 'Brentano revival' has the sense of an exercise in philosophical archaeology, or whether this is a much more general problem which merits at least an attempt at a reply.

In order to account for Brentano's invisibility, we must begin with a number of general observations (Albertazzi and Poli 1993b, Albertazzi, Libardi and Poli 1996b, Albertazzi and Poli 1997, Poli 1997b, Poli 1998).

First of all, let me recall that there are at least four general background features of the philosophy developed in the German-speaking countries — Germany especially — from 1830 onwards that warrant attention.

1. When the excesses of idealism died away, philosophy started to be developed in a psychological fashion. Perhaps the most persuasive evidence for this is the fact that university chairs of philosophy were increasingly and systematically awarded to psychologists, a process attended by the founding of the first laboratories of psychology.
2. The spread of profound philological interest in language and the simultaneous birth of linguistics. We need only mention Humboldt, the Grimm brothers, Bopp, Hermann and Steinthal.
3. The revival of Kant in the form of neo-Kantianism. Of course, when we start using labels with a prefix like 'neo-' we are emphasising not only links and similarities, but also and especially differences. Characteristic of the neo-Kantians, precisely because they were neo-Kantians and not simply Kantians, was their rejection of certain important aspects of

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Kantian thought. In particular, they were sceptical of the doctrine of the forms of intuition (space and time) as pure forms of intuition.

4. The revival of Aristotelian studies. In the second half of nineteenth century new editions of, and commentaries on, Aristotle were published by Schwegler, Bonitz, Tricot and others. In addition, there was Prantl's history of logic, Steinthal's history of grammar and ancient logic, Trendelenburg's history of the doctrine of the categories. All these studies, many of which resulted from a new philological sensibility, laid the basis for the modern study of Aristotle (Melandri, 1990).

The features we have summed up give an understanding of the general background, but it is clear that they cannot give an answer to our main question, namely the problem of Brentano's invisibility.

I will now turn to my analysis of the reasons explaining Brentano's invisibility. My answer is divided in three parts.

The first part is rooted in the assessment of Brentano's philosophical theory. As is well known, the reconstruction of Brentano's thought is still flawed and incomplete. Some of the reasons for this are today quite obvious and very familiar. Consider the following factors:

1. Brentano himself published very little during his lifetime compared with his vast and still largely unpublished *Nachlaß*.
2. A significant proportion of the posthumous works published under Brentano's name were composed, structured and even written by his pupils using methods which, to be charitable, we may call philologically improper. The essential fact, however, is that his unpublished works exceed both in quantity and, in certain cases, in theoretical importance his published *oeuvre*.
3. The loss of the exercise-books used by Brentano's pupils to take notes at his lectures. For many years these notebooks were the principal source of information for other pupils and friends.
4. The great emphasis laid by Brentano on oral teaching, which he regarded as more important than his written production.

In his introduction to the Italian translation of the second volume of *Psychology*, Puglisi stressed this very emphatically:

The vividness of his spoken words, the varied expression of his arguments, immediately evoked that impulse which was lacking in his writings. Hence it has been rightly said that the chief characteristic of Franz Brentano's teaching

was that it was oral. Perhaps, like Socrates, he preferred to teach through speech, because thus one teaches not only philosophy but also how to philosophise, thereby spurring intellectual enquiry (Puglisi 1913, 8).

5. Moreover, I must point out that most of Brentano's thought was set out in his correspondence: I need only cite the 1400 letters exchanged between him and Marty and which constitute a large part of his posthumously published work; or the fact that his letters addressed to one scholar were then passed on to others, who in turn intervened in the exchange of ideas (Baumgartner 1993, 239).
6. A further aspect of the problem is the blindness that afflicted Brentano in the last years of his life. Unable to write, he was forced to dictate his thoughts. Consequently, when he had to correct, modify or supplement previous writings or dictations, he found it easier to correct an already written text by dictating it anew. One thus often finds different versions of the same argument, sometimes with minimal changes, sometimes with much more substantial differences.

The above features – especially Brentano's emphasis on oral teaching, and the scantiness of his published work compared with the enormous quantity of his manuscripts and correspondence – are also of general relevance because they are rooted in Brentano's method of 'doing' philosophy. We know that the distinguishing feature of his philosophy was its empirical bias, its insistence on rigorous and partial analysis rather than on the construction of systems *by self-definition* coherent and self-sufficient. Given these features, it comes as no surprise that the same problem should be examined on several separate occasions and that different solutions should be proposed for it.

This procedure has a certain amount of inner coherence. Although Brentano always began his analysis with specific topics and problems, he proposed solutions which then reverberated throughout the entire edifice of his philosophy. This, as we have seen, is a manner of philosophising which takes the natural sciences as its model. Puglisi wrote,

Franz Brentano did not write a system of philosophy. He addressed certain fundamental problems in the same way as scientists contribute to a slowly-developing science by means of the relatively small-scale study of individual laws... For Brentano it was a contradiction to work according to the method of the natural sciences and to write a large quantity of bulky volumes (Puglisi 1913, 16-17).

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These factors also account for the different solutions that Brentano proposed for the problems he addressed. His thought, in fact, displays a continuity of method and a permanence of problems, but not a univocity of solutions.

7. The seventh component of this first list of reasons is Brentano's constant reference to Aristotle. As already said, the second half of the 19th century saw an explicit philological revival of Aristotle and, as a matter of fact, Brentano's first work on Aristotle, published in 1862, was dedicated to Trendelenburg. But Brentano was the only thinker at the time, or one of the very few, who presented a reading of Aristotle which offered not only an erudite philological exegesis, but also theoretical analysis.
8. The eight and last reason concerns the 'scholastic' atmosphere of certain of his reflections, not to mention the apparently scholastic topics that underpinned his theory. This explains why, according to Tatarkiewicz, "among his contemporaries Brentano was at first regarded as an anachronism, a medieval remnant" (Tatarkiewicz 1973, 220). In this regard, people usually refer to the topic of intentionality. Unfortunately, this belief is rather misleading, because Brentano (a) spoke of 'intentional reference' and not of 'intentionality,' and (b) his theory of intentional reference is rather different from the scholastic theory of intentionality (De Boer 1978).

In his *History of Nineteenth Century Philosophy*, Tatarkiewicz also points out that "his (=Brentano's) whole manner of thinking was a novelty for his contemporaries, even when he only returned to old views" (Tatarkiewicz 1973, 211), and that "Brentano accomplished something exceptional for the philosophy of the nineteenth century: he avoided a minimalistic limitation without falling into speculative metaphysics" (Tatarkiewicz 1973, 220).

To this first set of eight reasons (which I will label of an *internal* nature) I will now add a second set of reasons (labelled of an *external* nature). I call 'internal' the former set because it concerns Brentano's way of doing philosophy, while I call 'external' the latter set because it has to do with reasons of a roughly historical nature.

1. A number of Brentano's outstanding pupils achieved their own success and founded their own schools. Suffice it to mention Husserl's

phenomenology, Twardowski's Lvov-Warsaw school and Meinong's Graz school. The personal success and academic recognition attained by these exponents of Brentano's school (in the broad sense) have come to obscure their common thematic origins (Simons 1992, Coniglione, Poli and Wolenski 1993, Smith 1994, Albertazzi, Libardi and Poli 1996a, Poli 1997).

This aspect is further emphasised by the classification of Brentano as the *precursor* of phenomenology, thereby relegating his thought to a minor and complementary role (Tatarkiewicz 1973; Spiegelberg 1984, 27). One of the very few authors not to have committed this error is Wolfgang Stegmüller, whose work on the currents of contemporary philosophy correctly considers Brentano to be an independent thinker and characterizes his philosophy as the *philosophy of evidence* (Stegmüller 1978).

2. It is nowadays quite well known that at the beginning of this century, the roots of analytic and phenomenological philosophies occupied the same cultural territory. Although it may seem a somewhat crude overgeneralization, at least on the 'analytic' side, that Brentano was one of the founders of the analytic movement and in particular of the Vienna Circle, was explicitly stated in the Vienna Circle's manifesto. The section devoted to the historical background of the circle declared:

The commitment of physicists like Mach and Boltzmann to the teaching of philosophy testifies to the then dominant interest in the logical andgnoseological problems of the foundation of physics. From this fundamental theme also arose the requirement to renew logic; and it was at Vienna, although he moved from an entirely different direction, that Franz Brentano had opened the way. As a Catholic priest, Brentano was well-versed in scholastic philosophy, and he undoubtedly took from it its logical doctrines together with Leibnizian contributions for a reform of logic, while he left aside Kant and the systematic idealist philosophers. The appreciation by Brentano and his pupils of the work of scholars like Bolzano and others who sought to give a rigorous foundation to logic became more and more apparent. Alois Höfler stressed this aspect of Brentanian philosophy before a public which comprised, because of the influence of Mach and Boltzmann, numerous adherents of a scientific conception of the world. The philosophical society directed by Höfler held frequent meetings on thegnoseological and logical aspects of the foundation of physics at the University of Vienna... During roughly the same period (1870-1882), at work within Brentano's Viennese group was Alexius von Meinong (subsequently professor at Graz), whose *Gegenstandstheorie* had a certain

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affinity with the modern theory of concepts and whose pupil Ernst Mally likewise conducted research in the field of the logistic (*The Vienna Manifesto*, "Historical background" (my translation)).

This long quotation is of particular interest, for a number of reasons. In fact as soon as one discovers that Meinong had been Brentano's pupil and that Höfler and Mally had in turn been Meinong's, one realizes that many of the names cited above belonged to what was in many respects a unitary research group.

For this reason I may claim that the subsequent split between analytic philosophy and phenomenology contributed to generate, as a side-effect, the oblivion into which Franz Brentano's thought then fell.

3. "It is fair to say the Brentano tradition effectively died with the First World War. This was simply because the first two generations lost most of their members. Brentano died in 1917, Marty in 1914, Meinong in 1920" (Simons 1992, 156).
4. It may also be pointed out that with the disintegration of the political and geographical unity of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and especially with the events that hastened its final collapse, also the sense of unity of this philosophical and scientific tradition was lost. After 1918, the centres of this tradition — principally Vienna, Prague and Lvov — belonged to different states, and the prolific network of exchanges, contacts and relationships which was one of the reasons for the cultural richness of the period, was dismantled. However, each individual component still preserved something of the philosophical style of its master, a set of features which today permit us to talk of 'Central European philosophy' or, in Melandri's apt expression, of 'Central-East-European philosophy.'

All these reasons are correct and historically verifiable. I am nevertheless convinced that they do not tell the whole truth. To my mind, there is still something missing. Understanding of this missing component of the explanation requires resorting to a third set of reasons. It seems to me that this third set of reasons has to do with Brentano's idea of science.

It is well known that Brentano claimed that "the genuine method of philosophy is none other than that of natural science" (Brentano 1968). The thesis is clear. On the footing of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Brentano says that philosophy is a science. This is clear and well established. But, what does it mean to be a science?

Answering this question is not a simple affair, because there are at least two groups of features that should be considered, one of a methodological character and one of a more substantial nature.

Let us begin with the methodological features.

On methodological matters, Brentano and his pupils shared a fundamental view of how philosophical enquiry was to be conducted; a view which today is the acknowledged standard for all the versions and traditions of exact philosophy. Given its now widespread and unquestioning acceptance, the benefits brought by the introduction of this new level of exactness are easily underestimated. I shall very briefly describe those of its aspects that strike me as most interesting.

Brentano instilled in his pupils the conviction that philosophy should be rigorous, exact and clear (Mulligan 1986; Poli 1993-4). He not only gave his pupils direct instruction on how to philosophize with rigour, he also combined this teaching with detailed historical observation of the ways in which philosophical enquiry had been conducted in the past.

The immediate corollary to this methodology was the requirement that counter-examples should be provided. Theories distilled from analyses of the data must be verified, not only by the univocity and precision of the theoretical and non-theoretical terms used, but also by reference to a set of possible counter-examples constituting proof of the veracity of these theories and acting as a stimulus to their further development.

Examples also perform a crucial positive role. If the presence of examples is indicative of the degree of exactness of an argument, their absence leaves matters nebulous and unresolved.

Apart from the accurate description of phenomena and the search for relevant examples and counter-examples, exact formulation must be given to all components of the theory. In this sense, Twardowski's words are exemplary:

The obscurity of the style in which some philosophers write is not an inevitable consequence of the factors inherent in the subject matter of their analysis, but has its source in the vagueness and obscurity of the way they think... An author who does not know how to express his thoughts clearly does not know how to think clearly either, and therefore his thoughts do not deserve our efforts to guess them (Twardowski 1979, 2).

Development of correct theories is also made possible by the careful consideration of rival theories. Here Stumpf adds that the method learnt

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from Brentano, and before him from Aristotle, is to set out a complete list of all positions and eliminate all of them except the correct one.

From what I have said, it is no surprise to realise that all the Brentanists explicitly preferred research that was partial, precise, specific, and addressed to well-defined and circumscribed problems. Therefore, although the Brentanists were systematic thinkers, they had no liking for systems; or, put otherwise, they analyzed problems with extreme care but never sought to build philosophical systems on this basis.

A final and important point to make in this regard is that the Brentanists were zealous drawers of distinctions. Instead of looking for analogies (typical of the hermeneutic school) they stressed differences and introduced distinctions. This procedure was succinctly justified by Meinong as follows: between two people, one of whom makes a distinction and the other does not, it is usually the case that the one who introduces the distinction has realized something that the other has not (Meinong 1921, 115; Mulligan 1986, 91).

All this is correct but it is not enough. Methodological matters are a relevant component of any scientific enterprise, but no science is only a set of methodological criteria. What is still lacking is the true idea of what is a science.

It goes without saying that the thesis of the alliance of science and philosophy requires a correct conception of both of them. Unfortunately, too many contemporary thinkers believe not only that science and philosophy are reducible to abstractions but also that they are cognitive procedures of isolation, separation or even, as some have claimed, impoverishment and falsification of the overall image of the world. Standing on Brentano's footing, I will argue for the opposite viewpoint. In fact, science and philosophy are higher-order visions; they powerfully enrich our conceptions of the world; they reveal what would otherwise remain hidden; they make comprehensible what would be incomprehensible in their absence (Hartmann 1966).

In sum, my thesis is that the neo-positivist and analytic belief that science and philosophy are impoverishments of the image of the world (while crediting at most technological developments) is a major reason for the invisibility of Brentano.

When one analyses history from this point of view, one typically finds that a problem, once discovered, persists until it is finally resolved after a sequence of attempts to disentangle it. This perspective is largely correct. It should, however, be qualified if one is not to commit the ingenuous error of believing that it is only 'solutions' that advance knowledge. Also attempts

and failures, in fact, are instructive. It is also a fundamental error to believe that science should only admit of those problems that it is able to solve. Generally speaking, it is impossible to know beforehand what is solvable and what is not (Hartmann 1955). Secondly, if philosophy has to do with the most profound and intimate aspects of reality, then its problems are truly formidable and one should not be surprised if solutions are slow in coming.

We may consequently accept Aristotle's contention that ontology is *filosofia prima* as regards the problems it seeks to resolve, as long as we remember that it can only be *filosofia ultima* as regards the elaboration of results. And it is here that we discern how philosophy concretely operates in harness with science. "Philosophy," in fact, "presupposes the accumulated knowledge of centuries and the methodical experience of all the sciences" (Hartmann 1949, 26). This also means that philosophy as a whole is not an a priori science. It draws on the world. The task of philosophy is therefore to order the various fields of phenomena from which one may begin, so that they correspond to the natural relationships among their respective strata of being.

At the beginning of this paper some general features of the philosophy developed in the German-speaking countries from 1830 onwards were presented. According to the first of those features, philosophy in those countries started to be developed in a psychological fashion. Brentano, and in general many philosophers active prior to the First World War, developed their analyses on the study of presentation; on the basis, that is, of the psychological study of something that is actually given. For this reason their researches can and must be understood within the context of a close connection between metaphysics and psychology.

Scholars in the subsequent period instead used categorial tools based on what would later become the concept of model, and they attributed progressively greater importance to the multiplicity of possible models. They were interested not in what was somehow *given* but in what was *possible*. Reality was thus reduced to the occurrence of a structure, for which reason their inquiry concentrated on the relationship between ontology and logic.

In point of fact, there were also a number of scholars who studied the areas of intersection between these two perspectives. Very significantly, the two roads of material ontology and formal metaphysics led in very different directions. On the one hand, interest in material ontology has always been very keen; indeed, the label 'material ontology' can be used to classify, for example, the research conducted by the Gestalt psychologists. Very

different, however, has been the case of formal metaphysics. Here we find ourselves in forlorn and deserted territory, where the only significant name that comes immediately to mind is that of the Polish logician Stanislaw Lesniewski (Poli and Libardi 1998).

A preference for the prevalence of ontology or for the prevalence of metaphysics has consequences of enormous significance which have rarely been considered. Purely by way of example, suffice it to point out that the celebrated anti-psychologist revolution in logic has almost never been connected with the parallel shift of interest from metaphysics to ontology (Poli 1997b).

The most serious problems concern the dialectic between ontology and metaphysics. What is the relationship between them? Is metaphysics a *section* of ontology or is ontology a *variation* of metaphysics? In other words, must knowledge of what is possible precede knowledge of what is real, or should the modal be understood as an extension (or variation) of the actual? These are certainly not new questions. But at bottom it is the problems that are not particularly new. The solutions to them, by contrast, may be innovative indeed if the dialectic between metaphysics and ontology is given careful consideration.

One of the principal effects of the shift from metaphysics to ontology has been the situation of incommunicability that has arisen between logic and psychology. An incommunicability which, at various levels, has characterized the evolution of the entire twentieth century and which only now, owing to the impact of new research into artificial intelligence and cognitive psychology, is beginning to dissolve. Considering that cognitive sciences and artificial intelligence research are new fields of inquiry, in rapid and tumultuous growth, which have not yet been given systematic categorial structuration, they may have something to learn from the ideas developed by Brentano and his pupils.

Among the reasons for the split between analytic and continental philosophy I may also point to the fact that the second volume of Husserl's *Logical Investigations* was not seriously taken into consideration. In other and cruder words, we can say that it was simply not read and, when read, it was not understood. In consequence, this made it more and more difficult to understand the relations between the logical-ontological and the metaphysical-psychological levels.

The third of the previously recalled background features of nineteenth-century German philosophy was the birth of Neo-Kantianism. If we consider that analytic philosophy shares with the mainstream of continental philosophy the tendency to convert ontological problems into

epistemological problems we can see that Neo-Kantianism exerted in one form or another an influence on the main tendencies of twentieth century philosophy much deeper and wider than usually recognized. In fact, the philosophy of our century – in one way or another – has mainly taken up a Neo-Kantian position and analysed the structures of reality from the point of view of the structures of our cognition. This I consider to be one of the main reasons for the apparent decadence of contemporary philosophical research.

Moreover, the linguistic turn proclaimed by analytic philosophy shares with nineteenth-century German philosophy the idea that language plays a major role in any serious philosophical enterprise. Unfortunately, analysis developed within the analytical framework usually considered a very limited set of linguistic data and phenomena, not to mention the almost exclusive attention given to English. On the contrary, the linguistic analyses developed by nineteenth-century German philosophy was much broader and deeper. Besides the names recorded in the second of the background reasons given above, mention should be made at least of the problematizations of the Aristotelian concept of predication developed by philosophers such as Frege, Brentano and Marty.

These three reasons – namely the split between the psychological-metaphysical viewpoint and the ontological-logical one, the reduction of ontological problems to epistemological ones, the linguistic turn impoverished by the restriction to a a ridiculously limited set of data and languages – converge on a common point of accumulation. In fact, clarification of these points requires reconsideration of the ideas first of Aristotle and subsequently of Kant. At this point, it is plain that both Aristotle and Kant are vividly present in the theories developed by Brentano and his pupils. As a matter of fact, between the two, Brentano sits clearly on the side of Aristotle and struggles against Kant. But what is now relevant is that these two authors are – again – a major background feature of nineteenth-century German philosophy.

In sum, within the Austrian Empire of the nineteenth century, there developed a scientific philosophy which did not identify itself with the philosophy of science but which applied the tools of exact thought not only to epistemology, but to ontology, to metaphysics, to logic and to ethics as well.

There are various reasons for urging a revival of Brentano's thought. Even at a brief glance, the extent to which it spread its influence is astounding. Consider its already remembered ramifications in Husserl's phenomenology, the theory of objects of Meinong and the Lvov-Warsaw

school, and their various sub-branches. Consider also the split between the orthodox Brentanists (Kraus, Kastil, Mayer-Hillebrand) and their non-orthodox opponents, and their academic activities in the leading European universities of the time: all thinkers, orthodox or otherwise, standing to the right or the left of Brentano, who made a major contribution to contemporary scientific debate in a wide variety of fields. Recall, moreover, movements like *Gestaltpsychologie*, the Prague linguistics circle, and neo-marginalist theories. However, although we know the major ramifications of Brentano's thought, there is still much research to be done on its more distant affiliations, for example on the relationship between the Brentanists and the *Denkpsychologie* of Külpe, Selz and Bühler.

More in general, since Brentano, Austrian philosophy has furnished contemporary philosophy with tools of analysis in the fields of metaphysics, ontology, logic, philosophy of language, and psychology. In one sentence, I shall conclude by stressing that their idea of science as an enrichment of our conceptions of the world was too advanced and it took almost one century to become understandable and to gain acceptance.

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