Brentano (and Some Neo-Brentanians) on Inner Consciousness

Mark Textor†

ABSTRACT

Brentano’s theory of inner consciousness has recently had a surprising comeback. However, it is still an open question how it is best understood. It is widely held that according to Brentano a mental act is conscious iff it is self-presenting. In contrast, I will argue that Brentano holds that a mental act x is conscious iff it is unified with an immediately evident cognition (‘Erkenntnis’) of x. If one understands Brentano’s theory in this way, it promises to shed light on standard problems for theories of inner consciousness.

1. Introduction

We are often conscious of our current thoughts and feelings: when I feel a pain, I normally know immediately that this feeling occurs. Brentano calls this variety of consciousness ‘inner consciousness’.

His theory of inner consciousness develops the basic idea of higher-order theories of inner consciousness in a distinctive way. Higher-order theories of inner consciousness are based on the thesis that a mental act is conscious if, and only if, it is ‘targeted’ by an accompanying mental act. Inner consciousness is not taken to be a brute fact, but it is informatively explained in terms of the more basic notion of intentionality. According to Brentano’s theory, inner consciousness of a mental act m consists of (i) a presentation and (ii) an immediately evident cognition of m. Brentano’s theory preserves the intuitive idea that inner consciousness is the ‘immediate knowledge [which] we have of our present thoughts and purposes [. . .]’ (Reid 2002, 24).

Higher-order theories seem to provide an explanation of inner consciousness, but they face a number of standard problems. Mental acts that purport to present an object are, in general, not immune from failure of reference. If inner consciousness is a form of intentionality, one should expect that mental acts that aim to present other mental acts are also not immune from failure of reference. But how should one describe a case in which a putative ‘conscious making’ higher-order mental act fails to refer to a lower-order mental act? If we hold that in such a case

† King’s College, Strand, London, WC2R 2LS, UK; Email: mark.textor@kcl.ac.uk
1 See, for example, PES-E, 91; PES-G I, 128. Brentano uses ‘consciousness’ as an abbreviation for ‘mental act’, see PES-E, 102; PES-G I, 142.
2 Bergmann 1908 is an early discussion of Brentano’s theory. Bell 1990, 21ff makes important critical points. For a reply see Caston 2002, 793.
we are conscious of a mental act because the case is subjectively indistinguishable from a case of inner consciousness, we allow for inner consciousness of something that does not exist.\(^3\) If we hold that in this situation it merely seems to us that we are conscious of a mental act, we arrive at the counter-intuitive consequence that there are illusions of inner consciousness.\(^4\) If we take the putative conscious making mental acts to be immune from failure of reference, we must explain why this is so or this move is *ad hoc*. All available options seem unsatisfactory. In addition to this problem, higher-order theories seem to generate an infinite regress if one holds that only mental acts that are themselves conscious can make other mental acts conscious.

In view of the problems of higher-order theories philosophers of mind have turned their attention to Brentano:

> The growing disenchantment with higher-order theories made people look elsewhere for a viable alternative, and within the last couple of years quite a few have taken a closer look at Brentano (Zahavi 2004, 71).\(^5\)

Why *Brentano*? This question brings us to the significant difference between Brentano’s and higher-order theories. The problems just mentioned are due to the standard assumption of higher-order theories that the mental act made conscious and the conscious making act are ‘distinct existences’. Unlike current higher-order theorists, Brentano argues on independent grounds in his *Psychologie vom Empirischen Standpunkt* (PES) that the distinctness assumption is false (see sec. 4). If his argument is convincing, he can preserve the explanatory character of the higher-order theory and solve the problems mentioned above. A further important factor in Brentano’s account is his view that judgement does not involve predication. It enables him to describe the conscious making act as an acceptance of a mental act without assuming that it involves the exercise of concepts that classify mental acts. Hence, while Brentano endorses the view that inner consciousness is a form of intentionality, he tries to avoid the theoretical commitments that make higher-order theories unattractive.

The plan of the paper is as follows: In section 2 I will introduce the epistemological and judgement-theoretic assumptions on which Brentano’s theory of inner consciousness is based. In section 3 I will show that Brentano’s thesis that inner perception is infallible requires that the lower- and higher-order acts are ontologically dependent. In section 4 I will discuss Brentano’s Non-Duplication-Argument that shall establish that the lower- and higher-order act are distinguishable, but ontologically dependent parts of a unity. I will defend this reconstruction in section 5 against proposals that take Brentano to *identify* the act made conscious

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\(^3\) See Rosenthal 1997, 744.


with the conscious making act. If, as I claim, the conscious making act and the act made conscious are not identical, Brentano faces a regress of conscious making acts. In section 6 I will reconstruct Brentano’s response to the regress problem and discuss how it can be defended.

2. The basic elements of Brentano’s theory

Brentano understands by ‘mental phenomenon’ or ‘mental act’ mental events like perceivings (hearing a sound etc.), imaginings, judgements; mental processes (inferences); mental states (belief, doubt) and emotions. Brentano’s project in the first volume of PES is to say what distinguishes mental from physical phenomena. He argues in PES I for the following two theses:

(B1) x is a mental act iff x directed upon something. (PES-E, 88; PES-G I, 124–5)
(B2) x is a mental act iff there is an inner perception of x. (PES-E, 91, PES-E, 137; PES-G I, 128, PES-G I, 194)

Non-conscious mental states raise an obvious difficulty for (B1) and (B2). Even if I sleep dreamlessly, I can believe something. Brentano responds by pointing out that some mental states are dispositions. These dispositions are actualised in mental acts like judgements that fulfil (B1) and (B2). Mental states are mental phenomena courtesy of their actualisations.

First, (B1): according to this thesis, the distinctive feature of the mental is intentionality. Intentionality is metaphorically characterized as directedness upon something. The core of Brentano’s theory of intentionality is the concept of intentional inexistence. For example, he refers his reader to Aristotle’s De Anima:

Aristotle himself spoke of this mental in-existence. In his books on the soul he says that the sensed object, as such, is in the sensing subject; that the sense contains the sensed object without its matter; that the object which is thought is in the thinking intellect (PES-E, 88; PES-G I, 125).

Smith and other Brentano exegetes have argued convincingly that Brentano’s talk of ‘intentional inexistence’ has to be understood literally: the object exists in the mental act. The background for the intentional inexistence doctrine is Aristotle’s theory of perception. What is distinctive of the mind is that it can receive an

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7 PES-E, 79; PES-G I, 111–112.
8 See PES-E, 103; PES-G I, 144.
9 See PES-E, 88; PES-G I, 124–5. For discussions of the Aristotelian background of the intentional inexistence thesis see Caston 1998, George and Koehn 2004, 29ff., and Smith 1994, 40ff (Smith also discusses Comte’s influence on Brentano’s conception of intentional inexistence); see Moran 1996 for a general discussion.
Aristotelian form without its matter. For example, the form of a tiger can be in the mind without the mind becoming a tiger. One may ask ‘How can there be a form in something without its matter?’ Brentano is likely to answer that the mind is special in being able to receive forms in this way. The intentional inexistence thesis is controversial, but the argument in section 4 will not rely on it. Quite the contrary, it will make plausible that sometimes a mental act contains its object.

Second, (B2): Brentano unfolds (B2) as a conjunction of three theses:

(B2) \( x \) is a mental act iff \( x \)’s existence entails:

(i) the existence of a presentation (‘Vorstellung’) of \( x \) &
(ii) the existence of an immediately evident cognition of \( x \) &
(iii) the existence of an affective attitude directed upon \( x \).

(\text{PES-E, 143; PES-G I, 218ff; PES-E, 153ff; PES-G II, 139; PES-E, 273; DP-E, 26; DP-G, 24})

Inner perception is not inner observation. In inner observation one directs one’s attention towards a mental act that one has just experienced.\(^{10}\) The account of inner perception proposed in section 4 will make clear why Brentano says that inner perception cannot be inner observation.

Now to (i)–(iii): I have mentioned (iii) only to set it aside. In the second edition of PES Brentano will abandon (iii). (iii) also plays no role for the argument of the paper.\(^ {11}\)

Concerning (i): If something appears to you, you have a presentation of it. A presentation is a datable mental act. When I merely have a presentation of something, I do not need to have a positive cognitive (acceptance) or emotional (love) or a negative cognitive (rejection) or emotional attitude (hate) to it. Brentano goes on to propose that every mental act about something \( x \) is founded on a presentation of \( x \).\(^ {12}\)

Concerning (ii): Cognition is a species of judgement. Most contemporary philosophers take judgement to be a relation to a proposition; a \textit{propositional} attitude. According to them, the representational content of a judgement can only be completely specified by an assertoric sentence. In contrast, Brentano holds that the content of a judgement can be completely specified by a term, either a singular, general or plural term. Every judgement is either an acceptance (‘Anerkennung’) or a rejection of an (some) object(s).\(^ {13}\) Consider the following example: I merely present a horse and later I perceive a horse indistinguishable from the one I presented in thought. The two mental acts have the same representational content:

\(^ {10}\) See PES-G I, 181; PES-G I, 128–9.
\(^ {11}\) See PES-G II, 139; PES-E, 273.
\(^ {12}\) See PES-E, 80; PES-G I, 112. In his late manuscript VNV Brentano will change this view.
\(^ {13}\) See PES-G II, 139; PES-E, 276.
they purport to present something in the same way. However, they do so in *different modes* of being directed upon something. In the first case I accept the horse, in the second case I merely present it. The distinction between judgement and presentation so conceived is independent of the complexity of the content of the mental act. Judging is neither mentally ascribing existence nor some other property to an object.\(^\text{14}\)

Judgement has truth as a distinctive standard of correctness. But how can a judgement be true if it is an acceptance of an object? Brentano interprets the Aristotelian dictum that a saying is true if it says of what is that it is and of what is not that it is not (*Metaphysics* Γ 7: 1011b 26–7) as follows:

> [A] judgement is true if it asserts of some object that is, that it is, or if it denies of some object that is not, that it is (WE, 24).

Judgements accept or deny things; a judgement is true iff it accepts a thing that exists or it rejects a thing that doesn’t exist.

One will be sceptical whether all judgements, for instance, judgements with counterfactual contents, fit Brentano’s theory.\(^\text{15}\) Still, the judgements that constitute inner consciousness of our mental life may be non-predicative acceptances. As Brentano says, inner consciousness:

> consists [. . .] in the simple affirmation of the mental phenomenon which is present in inner consciousness (PES-E, 142; PES-G I, 201).

If I hear a sound, I affirm or accept *hearing a sound*, I don’t judge *that I myself hear a sound*.\(^\text{16}\) His theory of judgement allows Brentano to say that a thinker T who does not have an ‘I’-concept can have conscious experiences.\(^\text{17}\) T’s inner consciousness can be an acceptance of the experience. Since T does not possess the necessary concepts, T’s consciousness cannot be constituted by a judgement *that he himself hears a sound*.

Point (i) raises the following problem. There are presentations of a mental act that do not make it conscious. Consider the following example:\(^\text{18}\) While I am depressed my therapist makes me realise that I am depressed. Although I have a higher-order presentation of my current mental state, I have no inner conscious-

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\(^{14}\) One can try to spell out the distinction between judgement and presentation further by appealing to differences in direction of fit or functional role between the acts. But this is not necessary for our purposes. However, the difference in mode between judgement and presentation will become important in the discussion of the identity-thesis in section 4.

\(^{15}\) For a discussion of the problems of Brentano’s theory see Parsons 2004. For Brentano’s reform of logic based on the theory of judgement see Simons 2004.

\(^{16}\) Kriesel 2003a, 481 argues that Brentano held that higher-order judgements are first-person judgements. The above point makes clear that this not Brentano’s view in the first edition of PES.

\(^{17}\) See Hossack 2002, 164.

\(^{18}\) The example is due to Hossack 2002, 168.
ness of it. A depression is a mental state of a sort that one cannot be immediately conscious of. One has to find out that one is in it by being conscious of the depression’s symptoms. Hence we must ask ‘Which higher-order presentations make their objects conscious?’ This question brings us to the next element in Brentano’s account: immediately evident cognition. For Brentano suggests indirectly the following answer: a presentation $p$ of a mental act makes it conscious iff the judgement that accepts what $p$ presents is immediately evident.

What is an immediately evident cognition? The immediate evidence of the judgement that accompanies a mental act is for Brentano an undeniable fact that is neither in need of further explanation, nor is it possible to supply such an explanation. According to Brentano, immediate evidence cannot be defined; what immediate evidence is has to be learned from examples. (LRU, 142) Paradigm examples of immediately evident judgements are axiomatic judgements like the judgement that $1 = 1$. (See LRU, 111, 151.) If we contemplate such judgements, says Brentano, we learn that making an immediately evident judgement is judging with an insight into the truth.

The insight into the truth compels you to assent with certainty to the content judged and grounds an entitlement to certainty. (‘mit Fug und Recht sicher’, LRU, 159) If S makes an immediately evident judgement, the possibility that S judges falsely is excluded. Immediately evident judgements are infallible (‘untrüglich’, PES-E, 139; PES-G I, 196; see also LRU, 125 and 169).

3. An ontological problem

According to Brentano, if I hear a sound, I accept with immediate evidence that hearing occurs, that is, the acceptance could not have been wrong (PES-E, 139; PES-G I, 196). One way to expound the idea that the acceptance could not have been wrong is to say that there is no possible world that contains this very acceptance of hearing the sound, but lacks the mental act of hearing the sound. If the hearing of the sound and the acceptance of it are ‘distinct existences’, why can the later only exist if the former exists? Brentano’s answer rejects the assumption that the acceptance and the mental act are distinct existences. For:

If the cognition which accompanies a mental act were an act in its own right, a second act added on to the first one, if its relation to its object were simply that of an effect to its cause, similar to that which holds between a sensation and the physical stimulus which produces it, how could it be certain in and of itself? Indeed, how could we ever be sure of its infallibility at all? (PES-E, 139; PES-G I, 196).

Current higher-order theorists of awareness often take it to be clear that the higher-order act and the lower-order act can exist independently of each other. After all, my acceptance of a hearing and the hearing are two different things. Hence, they are forced to deny that we have infallible knowledge of our own
mental acts. Consequently, they cannot use the notion of immediate evidence to distinguish those higher-order judgements that constitute consciousness from those that do not.

According to Brentano, it is neither possible nor necessary to explain or ground the immediate evidence of inner perception further. *Epistemological* theorising is not needed:

What is clearly needed instead is a theory about the relation between such perception and its object, which is compatible with its immediate evidence (PES-E, 140; PES-G I, 198–199).

Brentano sets himself the task to answer the question ‘What is the relation between the act made conscious and the conscious making act that allows for the immediate evidence of the latter?’. He answers this question by arguing on the basis of *non-epistemic premises* that a special relation must obtain between those acts. Since this part of Brentano’s theory does not involve controversial assumptions about inner perception, it is of interest even for those who doubt that judgements about our current mental life are infallible. I will now have a close look at Brentano’s Non-Duplication Argument.

4. The non-duplication argument

Consider the case in which you hear a sound and you are conscious of hearing it. According to Brentano, you then have a presentation of the hearing of the sound. Brentano’s argument starts from the question ‘In this case, how many presentations are there?’. To answer this question one needs a criterion of distinctness for presentations. Brentano tests the following one: If the singular presentation \( m \) presents \( a \) and the singular presentation \( n \) presents \( b \), and \( a \neq b \), \( m \) and \( n \) are distinct. (PES-E, 127; PES-G I, 177) Now the hearing of the sound presents obviously the sound, while the presentation of the hearing of the sound presents the hearing of the sound. Since the presentations have different objects, the presentations should be distinct. However, the sound heard is presented in both. The sound is the explicit object of the lower-order act (‘ausschließlicher Gegenstand’), i.e. the hearing presents exclusively the sound. And the sound is the implicit object (‘eingeschlossener Gegenstand’) of the higher-order act (i.e. the presentation of the hearing of the sound presents in addition to the hearing the sound). If the lower- and higher-order acts are distinct presentations, the sound heard must be presented twice. To see this, consider the following analogy: if my painting \( A \) and my painting \( A \) hitting \( B \) are distinct existences, I have painted \( A \) twice:

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19 See Armstrong 1993, 100–113; and Rosenthal 1997, 744.
It would seem, therefore, as Aristotle also noted, to turn out that the physical phenomenon [the sound] must be presented twice. Yet this is not the case. Rather, inner experience seems to prove undeniably that the presentation of the sound is connected with the presentation of the presentation of the sound in such a peculiarly intimate way that *its being at the same time contributes inwardly to the being of the other* [‘dass sie [die Vorstellung des Tones], indem sie besteht, zugleich innerlich zum Sein der anderen beiträgt’].

This suggests that there is a peculiar interweaving [‘eigentümliche Verwebung’] of the object of inner presentation and the presentation itself, and that both belong to one and the same act. We must in fact assume this (PES-E, 127; PES-G I, 179; Translation of the italicised passages by me, original in brackets).

Although Brentano appeals to inner awareness of a special relation between presentations in the argument, the crucial step of his argument is independent of this appeal. The point of the argument can be brought out by considering the following question: How can the sound heard be presented just once, although there are two singular presentations directed upon it? Brentano’s answer is: the presentations are not distinct. Again the analogy introduced above is helpful: If in painting A and painting A hitting B, I have painted A only once, the two acts of painting cannot be distinct. It seems natural to say that the painting of A is contained in my painting A hitting B. Similarly, if the sound is not presented twice over, once in the first-order presentation, a second time in the higher-order presentation, the presentations cannot be distinct. The mental acts are interwoven or fused. This should be taken literally. The higher-order presentation is about the sound heard in virtue of containing the hearing of the sound as a constituent. This is in line with the concept of intentional inexistence: the object of the higher-order act, i.e. the lower-order act, is one of its constituents. The hearing of the sound is a constituent of the presentation of the hearing.

Although the constituency-thesis sounds *prima facie* bizarre, it captures the common sense ontology that underpins our knowledge of our mental acts. The constituency-thesis has been revived recently, for example, by Burge:

> When one knows that one is thinking that *p*, one is not taking one’s thought (or thinking) that *p* merely as an object. One is thinking that *p* in the very event of thinking knowledgeably that one is thinking it. It is thought and thought about in the same mental act (Burge 1988, 654; See also Siewert 2001, 554).

Although we have no explication of the notion of constituency employed here, we have models for it. The sentence ‘A is a letter’ is about the letter ‘A’ in virtue of containing it.

The constituency-thesis allows Brentano to hold (i) that the higher-order presentation is, in part, about the same object as the first-order presentation it refers to and (ii) that this object is not represented twice. If the higher-order presentation

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20 Variants of the argument are given in PES-G I, 188; PES-E, 134 and PES-G I, 193; PES-E, 137.
contains the lower-order presentation it is about, the occurrence of the higher-order presentation necessarily requires the exercise of the concepts constituting the lower-order presentation. Hence, the higher-order presentation will indirectly present the objects of the lower-order presentation.

The constituency-thesis has four philosophically interesting consequences: First, some complex objects, for example, a living organism, can survive the loss or exchange of parts. Hence, although A is actually constituted by B and C, it could have been constituted by different objects. However, the presentation of the current hearing of the sound cannot be the presentation it is if it does not contain the current hearing of sound. Why? The Non-Duplication Argument leads to the conclusion that the higher-order presentation is in part about the sound in virtue of containing the hearing of the sound. We need to add to this a distinctness criterion for presentations. Indirectly, the Non-Duplication Argument shows that one cannot distinguish presentations via their objects in a simple way. But we can say: given that the singular presentations \( m \) and \( n \) present something, if no object presented by \( m \) is presented by \( n \) (and vice versa), \( m \) and \( n \) are distinct. The constituency-thesis implies that the higher-order presentation would be about another object if it would not contain the hearing of the sound but something else. According to the new criterion of difference, the new higher-order presentations and the original one are distinct. Hence, if the hearing is a part of the higher-order presentation, it is an essential part of the higher-order presentation. Compare the following: The quotation name ‘ABBA’ cannot change its constituents. A change would create a quotation name of a different word and thereby a new quotation name. The two names are different entities. Hence, the word is an essential constituent of its quotation name. The same goes for the presentation of the current hearing of the sound. It contains the current hearing of the sound in all possible worlds. This modal thesis is arrived at via reflection on the constituency thesis. It could not have been arrived at via introspection. For introspection only registers the actual properties of mental acts.

Second: Brentano set out to show that higher- and lower-order acts are related in a way that allows the higher-order act to be an immediately evident cognition. The previous point showed that the presentation of the hearing of the sound can only exist if the hearing of the sound exists. In Brentano’s own terminology: the first act is one-sidedly dependent on the second. Hence, if the presentation (acceptance) of the hearing of the sound contains the hearing of the sound, it is possible that the higher-order act is infallible. For in every possible world in which the higher-order act exists, the lower-order act exists also. Please note: the constituency thesis does not explain how infallible cognition of mental acts is possible, but it is an ontological precondition for its possibility. That this precondition is satisfied has been argued on independent grounds.
Third: If the presentation (acceptance) of the hearing is one-sidedly dependent on the hearing, the two mental acts form ONE whole or unity. That is exactly how Brentano formulates the conclusion of his argument:

The presentation of the sound and the presentation of the presentation of the sound form a single mental phenomenon; it is only by considering it in its relation to two different objects, one of which is a physical phenomenon and the other a mental phenomenon, that we divide it conceptually into two presentations (PES-E, 127; PES-G I, 179).

Later he sums up his results by saying that the first- and the higher-order act are ‘parts of a unified real being’. (PES-E, 155; PES-G I, 221) The mental unity contains (non-spatial) parts that cannot be separated. Brentano will show in DP that there are independent examples of such unities. There may be physical things (atoms) that are not composed from other physical things, and yet one can distinguish in atoms parts that cannot be separated from them: there is a half an atom, a quarter and so on. These parts are called ‘distinctive parts’ (‘distinktionelle Teile’).\(^{21}\)

Fourth: If the act made conscious \(m_1\) and the conscious making act \(m_2\) are distinct and ontologically independent, \(m_2\) cannot be infallible. For \(m_2\) could exist without \(m_1\). But since inner consciousness is a form of infallible knowledge, no mental act that is independent from \(m_1\) can make it conscious. This argument is the basis for Brentano’s distinction between inner consciousness and inner observation. If I recollect a mental act that just occurred, I can observe it. But then the act recollected and the observation are distinct; they exist at different times.\(^{22}\) Hence, inner observation cannot be a source of immediate knowledge and therefore, it cannot be (a form of) inner consciousness.

Brentano also says that the being of the first-order act \(m_1\) includes the being of the second-order act \(m_2\).\(^{23}\) The higher-order act is contained in the lower-order act in the sense that the second is ontologically dependent on the first. This interpretation is confirmed in DP where Brentano takes the higher- and the lower-order acts to be distinguishable, but non-separable parts of a whole.\(^{24}\) Has Brentano a good argument for this view?

In PES I Brentano claims to have proved that every mental act is conscious. He argues against a threshold model of consciousness that says that a mental act must have a certain degree of intensity to be conscious by appealing to the observation that mental act and the accompanying presentation and judgement have the same intensity. He then goes on to turn his criticism into an argument for the thesis that every mental act is conscious:

\(^{21}\) See DP-E 16, DP-G, 13. For discussion see Mulligan and Smith 1985, 632.
\(^{22}\) See PES-G I, 181; PES-E, 129.
\(^{23}\) See PES-G I, 180, 183, PES-E, 129, 130.
There are no unconscious mental acts, for wherever there exists a mental act of greater or lesser intensity, it is necessary to attribute an equal intensity to the presentation which accompanies it and of which this act is the object (PES-E, 121, PES-G I, 170; See also PES I book 2, chap. 2, § 13 and chap. 3, § 4 and § 6).

But this argument assumes what has to be shown: that for every mental act there is an accompanying higher-order act.

At this point we should accept that Brentano has no good reason for the assumption that every mental act is conscious. This is to his advantage because there are strong counter-examples to the claim that every mental act is conscious (blind-sight seems to be a mental act, but not conscious). If we reject the thesis that the first-order mental act depends on the higher-order act, Brentano’s so modified theory is not refuted by implying a false conclusion. Moreover, the assumption that every mental state is conscious is too weak for Brentano’s purposes. That every mental act is conscious might just be a contingent general fact, not an insight into the nature of these acts.

The less controversial and more interesting part of Brentano’s theory is independent of the controversial thesis that the higher-order act is contained in the lower-order act. Even if this claim is false, Brentano’s theory still allows him to say under which conditions a mental act is conscious, namely, when, and only when, it is accepted in an immediately evident judgement.

Furthermore, while not every mental act is conscious, pains and sensory experiences are good candidates for mental phenomena that one cannot have without being conscious of them. If we assume that such essentially conscious states are Brentano’s primary target, we can say that the identity of an essentially conscious act requires the existence of a conscious making act. Being conscious is an essential feature of the act and being conscious is nothing but being object of an immediately evident acceptance.

To summarise: Brentano has presented an argument that does not make use of epistemic premises about inner perception for the conclusion that the higher-order mental act \( m_2 \) depends on the lower-order mental act \( m_1 \) and that both form a unity. However, he has no good reason to endorse that lower-order mental act \( m_1 \) ontologically depends on the higher-order mental act \( m_2 \). If the first thesis is true, Brentano has achieved the main point he aimed for: to establish that a relation holds between the conscious making act and the act made conscious that is compatible with the immediate evidence of the first act.

5. Against the identity-reading of Brentano’s theory

Some philosophers have proposed an alternative interpretation of Brentano’s theory. They take Brentano’s talk that one and same mental act has two objects as their starting point. For example, Hossack claims:
[Brentano claims] that any conscious state is identical with knowledge of its own occurrence (Hossack 2002, 174; See also Kriegel 2003a, 480f and Caston 2002, 769 and 792).

How can a higher- and a lower order mental act be identical? The expressions ‘first-order’ and ‘second-order’ refer to the type of content (mode of presentation) a mental state possesses. A content or mode of presentation is higher-order iff it has the content of other mental states embedded in it. A mental state is higher-order iff it has a higher-order content. Now one token mental state can instantiate different types of content, provided the contents don’t exclude each other. If a mental state has a higher-order and a lower-order mode of presentation, it will present itself and an object distinct from itself.25

The identity-thesis indeed solves the problems Brentano wants to solve in his discussion of inner consciousness. If the hearing of the sound is identical to the evident affirmation of itself, then the evident self-affirmation of the hearing of the sound obviously can only exist if hearing the sound exists (infallibility); and the hearing of the sound is sufficient for the evident self-affirmation (luminosity). Brentano subscribes to luminosity and infallibility; the identity-thesis allows him to do so.

The identity-theory also offers a solution to the regress problem. If the hearing of the sound is the evident affirmation of itself, then the hearing represents itself under one mode of presentation. No further act is needed to make it conscious and the regress is avoided.

Prima facie, this response is unsatisfactory. For I may not be conscious of the hearing of the sound under the mode of presentation [perceiving hearing this sound]. We need therefore to ascribe to the mental act a third mode of presentation [perceiving perceiving hearing this sound]. Hence, we must ascribe to one token mental state an infinity of modes of presentation. And this is no less implausible than the assumption of an infinity of mental states.

Caston and Kriegel have defended the identity-reading against this objection.26 There is no need to posit a further mode of presentation under which the act is conscious. For it is conscious under some mode of presentation. Nothing said so far requires it to be conscious under a particular mode of presentation. There is no need for further higher-order contents.

The identity-thesis has attractive features, but it is not Brentano’s thesis. The judgement that accompanies a mental act and the mental act represented can differ in mode. For example, I may merely present Pegasus, without accepting him. According to the identity-thesis, my presentation of the sound is identical with my presentation and my acceptance of the presentation of the sound. If the presentation is identical with the presentation and acceptance of it, the same

mental event must be a presentation and an acceptance! And this is impossible. In the Appendix to the 1911 edition of PES Brentano uses this difference in mode to reject the identity-thesis:

Even when mental references have the same object, they can still be different if the modes of reference are different ['die psychischen Beziehungen können ja noch immer mehrere sein, wenn die Modi der Beziehungen mehrere sind']. This is what we find to be the case with mental references εν ραπεργω (PES-E, 276; PES-G II, 139; My emphasis).

Every mental act is a complex consisting of a first-order mental act (hearing note A), a second-order presentation and an immediately evident second-order acceptance (hearing note A occurs). The second-order presentation and second-order acceptance are co-referential, but different in mode. Since there is a difference in mode, they cannot be identical. Similarly, the first-order and the higher-order mental acts can have different modes: I can be conscious of an imagining of something, that is, I can accept it with immediate evidence. This argument is, I take it, already at work in 1874 when Brentano, after contrasting (real) identity and qualitative identity, says:

[I]t is clear that such a real identity never holds between our concurrent mental activities, and that it will never be found between the diverse aspects ['Seiten'] of the simplest act which we differentiated earlier. The perception of the hearing is not identical with the feeling we have towards hearing. They are divisives of the same reality, but that does not make them really identical with it and thus with one another (PES-E, 161; PES-G I, 228–9; My emphasis).

The aspects of the simplest mental act are of course the presentation, cognition and feeling directed upon itself. A ‘divisive’ is an object that can be distinguished in another object as a part, although it cannot be separated from it. A mental act is a whole, in which three mental acts can be distinguished, but not separated. This is exactly the result we arrived at in section 4.27

In contrast to the identity-reading, the understanding of Brentano’s theory developed in sec. 3 makes it possible that higher- and lower-order act differ in mode. While the same mental act cannot have different modes, a complex mental act may have constituent acts that differ in mode. I can, for instance, imagine of a perceived object that it has a different colour than its actual colour: My de re imagining that this car (that I see to be blue) is green contains mental acts with different modes. I see and endorse the car, while I merely imagine that it is green. Like the higher- and lower-order mental acts, the mental acts composing the de re imagination are ontologically dependent. In a derivative sense one may say that the mental act has two opposed modes, but this is harmless when one keeps in mind that the fundamental bearers of these qualities are the constituents of the total act.

27 See PES-E, 161; PES-G I, 223.
The proponent of the identity theory can reply in two ways:

First, he can reject that inner consciousness partially consists in an evident acceptance. A special sort of presentation of a mental act is sufficient for consciousness. A presentation of \(x\) is compatible with any other attitudes towards \(x\), since all other attitudes are founded upon presentations. Hence, the difference in mode is no problem. However, when I am conscious of a mental phenomenon, I do not merely present it, I know it and hence, accept it.

Second, the identity-theorist can hold that the same mental state can have different modes. But some modes of thinking a content exclude each other. Take the conscious mental act that is an actualisation of a desire: According to the identity-reading of Brentano, the occurrent desire will be identical with an affirmation of the occurrent desire. But one and the same mental event cannot be a desire and a judgement. Desires and judgements have different directions of fit. Moreover, Brentano takes the dual of acceptance to be rejection. No single mental act can be a rejection and an acceptance.

This problem arises also for Soldati’s proposal, according to which Brentanian acceptance is a character of a mental act:

When the subject cognitively reacts to the experience, the experience itself acquires the character of acceptance. It is experienced as real and actual. There are no two items to count here: the experience on the one hand, and the acceptance on the other (Soldati 2005, 68).

But if the first-order act made conscious is a rejection, one and the same mental act must have opposed qualities: it must be an acceptance and a rejection. This consequence is unacceptable for Brentano.

One may reply that the desire concerns one object, say wisdom, while the judgement is an acceptance of present desire for wisdom. The identity-theorist must say that a mental event is, relative to one content, a desire, relative to another content, an acceptance. The cost of accepting the identity-theory would be that all modes of thinking had to be relativised to contents. If the only reason for such a complication of the theory of intentionality is the identity-theory, and there is no better alternative, then this move is \textit{ad hoc}. Whether the interpretation of Brentano’s theory proposed in sec. 3 is a better alternative depends on its ability to stop the regress. For this reason the next section is devoted to Brentano’s attempt to solve this problem.

6. Brentano on the regress

Assume that every mental act is a unity of a first-order presentation \(m_1\), a second-order presentation \(v_2\) and a second-order acceptance \(m_2\). If the second-order mental acts \(v_2\) and \(m_2\) are conscious, we seem to need third-order mental acts \(v_3\) and \(m_3\) about \(m_2\) and \(v_2\) and so on. Can one stop the regress by allowing that unconscious
mental acts make other mental acts conscious? Since Brentano subscribes to the thesis that every mental act is conscious, he cannot argue that unconscious mental acts stop the regress. But even if we reject Brentano’s view, we have a reason to look for a way to stop the regress that does not invoke unconscious mental acts.

Is a mental act conscious iff (i) there is an unconscious mental act directed at it or iff (ii) there is a conscious mental act directed at it? Kriegel has argued that only (ii) is feasible, since we experience the higher-order mental act, and if the act is experienced, it is conscious. When I consciously attend to something, I do not focus on my attending to x, but I am still non-inferentially aware of it.28

The identity-theorist’s explanation of how higher-order acts are conscious does not create a regress (see sec. 5). But since Brentano does not hold the identity-theory, he faces the regress and should offer a solution. He indeed develops an original response to the problem.

How does Brentano intend to stop this regress? Thomasson interprets Brentano correctly as holding that the conscious making act is ontologically dependent on the act made conscious. She takes the ontological dependence to stop the regress of higher-order acts:

Since the features that make an act conscious are firmly located within the act itself rather than bestowed on it by a second act, this locates Brentano’s view as a one-level view of consciousness. It is this move that provides the key to avoiding the regress problem without any need to postulate unconscious mental states (Thomasson 2000, 192; See also Zahavi 2004, 71–2).

But even if inner consciousness is a dependent aspect of an experience, it is still unclear why this feature itself should be conscious if it makes a mental act conscious. Not all features of a mental act are conscious if it is conscious.

However, the solution attributed to Brentano is not his. In PES I he writes:

[T]he consciousness which accompanies the presentation of the sound is a consciousness of the presentation as well as of the whole mental act in which the sound is presented and in which it [i.e. the consciousness of the presentation of the sound] itself exists concomitantly (PES-E, 129; PES-G1, 182; My translation and emphasis).

Later, in the appendix to the 1911 edition of PES, Brentano looks back to this discussion and explains the crucial idea in an illuminating way:

In a single mental activity […] there is always a plurality of references and a plurality of objects.

As I have already emphasised in my Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint, however, one should not single out one of these relations to be the secondary object, for example, the mental relation to the primary object. This, as it can easily be seen, will lead to infinite regress, for there would have to be a third reference, which would have to have the secondary reference as object, a fourth, which would have the additional third one as object, and so on. The secondary object is not one of the

28 See Kriegel 2003b, 122. See also Zahavi 2004, 70.
mental references, but the mental activity, or more precisely, the mentally active thing, in which the secondary reference is included along with the primary one (PES-E, 276; PES-G II, 138–9; My translation and emphasis).

This later passage has to be read with care. In 1911 Brentano was convinced that there are only particulars, among them thinkers (Reism). While in 1874 the judgements of inner perception where acceptances of unitities of mental phenomena, in 1911 these judgements accept a thinker, ‘a mentally active thing’, that is modified in certain ways. If we disentangle Brentano’s Reism from the original theory of inner perception, Brentano re-affirms here that the higher-order presentation has not one mental act in particular as its object, but the unity of the interwoven mental acts. What stops the regress, says Brentano, is that the higher-order act is about the unity consisting of the higher- and the lower-order act. Hence, his solution to the regress problem is based on the conclusion of the Non-Duplication Argument that the higher-order act and its object, the lower-order act, form a unity.

How does this assumption stop the regress? Assume that the object of the second-order presentation is neither \( m_1 \), nor \( v_2 \) nor \( m_2 \), but the unity of them \( \{m_1 + v_2 + m_2\} \). Brentano is committed to this assumption by one of his criteria of the mental:

\[
\text{[A distinguishing characteristic of the mental is] the fact that the mental phenomena which we perceive, in spite of all their multiplicity, always appear to us as a unity, while physical phenomena, which we perceive at the same time, do not all appear in the same way as parts of one single phenomenon. (PES-E, 98; PES-G I, 137).}
\]

The metaphysically prior composition of a mental unity out of parts is epistemically posterior. We have to learn to distinguish different parts in the unity. For this reason Brentano says that mental acts are ‘fused’ (‘verschmolzen’). Brentano’s student Carl Stumpf later makes fusion a key-concept in his Tonpsychologie. He uses a chord as an example of fusion. The notes of a chord form a whole (‘Empfindungsganzes’). In his discussion of Stumpf’s theory, Brentano explains that x is a fusion iff x is a whole whose parts are not distinguished in a single perception of x. Think of hearing a chord: you hear a plurality of notes, but you cannot but perceive them as ONE thing. It takes attention and training to break

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29 Brentano’s reistic ontology is discussed Chrudzimski and Smith 2004, see especially 215f.
30 For this interpretation see Kriegel 2003a, 481.
31 Brentano refers in PES-E, 130; PES-G I, 183 his readers to the first two chapters of J. Bergmann 1870. In the second chapter Bergmann analyses on p. 67–8 self-reference in terms of a whole (‘Ganzes’) that is distinct from its parts.
32 Stumpf 1883, 65 uses ‘Verschmelzung’ only for a complex object that is perceived as one and whose parts can be detached. But this is only a stipulation for a quasi-technical use.
33 US, 218 and 226.
34 See Stumpf 1883, 65.
the chord up into its constituents. The same holds for the group of mental acts that make up the experience of a sound:

The presentation of the sound and the presentation of the presentation of the sound form a single mental phenomenon; it is only by considering it in its relation to two different objects, one of which is a physical phenomenon and the other a mental phenomenon, that we divide it conceptually into two presentations (PES-E, 127; PES-G I, 179).

Inner perception is like the perception of a group whose elements are not distinguished by the perceiver.

Brentano adds to the thesis that inner perception is acceptance of unities a thesis about the character of the acceptance of unities. He makes it explicit in later work:

10. Something which is not implicitly perceived by us does not occur in our consciousness. But that does not mean that it is explicitly perceived. A clarification of this distinction seems to be desirable. Perception is an acceptance. And if the accepted thing is a whole with parts, then the parts are all, in a certain manner, concomitantly accepted [‘mitanerkannt’]. The denial of any of them would contradict the whole. Yet the individual part is, for this reason, by no means accepted let alone judged specifically [‘nicht ausdrücklich’] (by itself) and in particular (DP-E, 36; DP-G, 34).

In a concomitant acceptance the object is indistinctly presented. (‘indistinktes Vorstellen’, DP-G, 22f; DP-E, 25f).

If we put the theory of judgement and the theory of unities together, we can give the following argument:

\[(C2) \text{ The higher-order act } m_2 \text{ is an immediately evident acceptance of } \{m_1 + v_2 + m_2\}.\]

\[(\text{ConA}) \text{ If there is a distinct acceptance of the unity } \{A + B\}, A \text{ is thereby concomitantly accepted and } B \text{ is thereby concomitantly accepted. (From Brentano’s theory of judgement),}\]

Therefore: \((3) m_2 \text{ is (among other things) a concomitant acceptance of } m_2 \text{ } (v_2 \text{ is (among other things) an indistinct presentation of } v_2).\)

Result: no further acceptance of \(m_2\) is needed, there is no regress.

Let us look at premise (ConA) in more detail. Unrestricted, (ConA) is implausible. If I accept a disc, I am rationally committed to accept every part of the disc, even those parts that I myself cannot discern. But being committed to accept a part does not mean that I actually accept it. If I accept the disc, and someone informs me that \(a\) is part of the disc, I cannot rationally reject \(a\), while at the same time continuing to accept the disc. But the part \(a\) of the disc is not presented in the judgement that accepts the disc. Hence, indistinct presentation and acceptance seem only to be a form of presentation and acceptance in a ‘Pickwickian’ sense.
The rational commitment to accept the part does not deserve the title ‘acceptance’ if it covers every part of an object accepted, even those that are completely unknown to the thinker.

However, Brentano’s concomitant acceptance seems plausible for those wholes relevant for the regress. Here is a helpful example:

"[I]n a chord the individual sounds are given implicitly in a presentation, many people are simply not able to discern the individual sounds, each on its own, in hearing [. . .] (AN, 332–333; My translation)."

If you hear a chord, you hear distinctly the chord consisting of the notes A, C and E. Brentano holds that in hearing the chord distinctly all the sounds that compose it are really heard (‘wirklich erfasst’), but not distinguished. But why is that not just a fancy way to say that you hear one thing that consists of three sounds?

Because in hearing the chord, you do experience the individual notes that compose the chord. Think of first hearing the chord without recognising its complexity: you don’t judge that, among other things, you hear an A. Later you hear it in isolation and train your ability to listen for this note. And now you recall that you heard the note before. You recall experientially how the chord sounded when you heard it. On the basis of your memory experience you now make the justified judgement that you heard an A before. This is evidence that you heard the note before. You were aware of it, but you did not notice the note and hence, you did not make a separate or distinct judgement about it. Hearing a note has a special phenomenal character; there is something how it is like to hear an A. When you have been trained to distinguish notes by listening, you can exploit the phenomenal character to ‘spot’ the note. Your memory experiences are states with a phenomenological character that derives from and is similar to the phenomenal character of the original perception. If you can judge now on the basis of experiential memory that you heard the note before, your memory experience must be phenomenologically similar to the original hearing experience. This is (defeasible) evidence that you have experienced the note before. In such cases it is right to say that something was perceived or experienced, because one can recall how it sounded to one. This suggests that it is sufficient for being conscious of something that is noticeable; requiring that it is actually noticed is too strong.

We can now complete the discussion of Brentano’s argument. A conscious mental phenomenon consists of three distinguishable parts: the lower-order act, the higher-order presentation and the acceptance of the lower-order act. What the

35 See PES-E, 277; PES-G II, 140.
36 Martin 1992, 749f. defends the theses about episodic memory used here.
37 See Martin 1992, 749. For Brentano’s view on noticing see, for example, DP-E, 34; DP-G, 31

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higher-order mental act presents and accepts is the whole mental phenomenon in which it and the lower-order act can be distinguished. Now we know that for Brentano explicitly accepting a whole is concomitantly accepting all its parts. This is plausible if the whole is a fusion of discernible parts. Let \( W \) be the fusion of the first-order act \( x \), the second-order presentation \( y \) and the acceptance of \( W \) \( z \). Then \( W \) is conscious, for \( z \) is an immediately evident distinct acceptance of \( W \). \( x, y \) and \( z \) are conscious, for each of them is concomitantly accepted in distinctly accepting \( W \) that contains them. Every divisive of the mental act is indistinctly accepted (presented). Hence, a third-order mental act \( m_3 \) would only be necessary if every inner perception is distinct. But Brentano disputes this: inner perception is confused and evident. (PES-II, 141; PES-E, 277; DP-G, 23–4; DP-E, 25–6)

It is evident to me that a complex mental phenomenon occurs even if I cannot explicitly accept all the parts I experience. This is why Mulligan says that ‘inner perception in the narrow sense is essentially confused although self-evident.’

Hence, Brentano can stop the regress without endorsing the identity-thesis.

Now to a difficulty for Brentano’s solution. We learn from Brentano’s Non-Duplication Argument that the first-order presentation made conscious is presented and contained in the conscious making higher-order presentation. We learn from Brentano’s solution of the regress problem that the higher-order mental act always presents a unity of mental acts. Hence, the different arguments impose different requirements on the higher-order presentation: on the one hand it shall present the first-order act, on the other hand it shall present a whole containing this act. The different requirements would lead to a serious problem if the higher-order presentation could not satisfy both simultaneously. If we look closely at the passage from PES I quoted before, we see that Brentano has already told us that both requirements are satisfied simultaneously:

\[
\text{The consciousness which accompanies the presentation of the sound is a consciousness of the presentation as well as of the whole mental act in which the sound is presented and in which it itself exists concomitantly (PES-E, 129, PES-G I, 182; My emphasis).}
\]

In line with Brentano’s general idea that one mental act can have several objects, the higher-order presentation \( m_2 \) has two objects: the lower-order act \( m_1 \) (and \( m_2 \) shares an object with \( m_1 \)) as well as the unity \( \{m_1 + v_2 + m_2\} \).

This can be made plausible taking again hearing a chord as our model. In hearing distinctly the chord ACE, I don’t hear all notes composing the chord distinctly, but it is a common experience among musicians that the so-called ‘top note’ of a chord is ‘highlighted’ and distinguished in hearing the chord. The top note stands out, but it is also an essential part of the chord I hear. Hence, the hearing presents the top note and the chord.

38 See Mulligan 2004, 73.

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In his discussion of the confused character of inner perception Brentano leaves room for the possibility that some parts of the whole of inner experiences are perceived distinctly:

Sensible space is alternatively full and empty in one place and in another, but the individual full and empty places are not clearly differentiated. If this is true of physical phenomena, something analogous is true of the mental activity which refers to it. Thus we have in this case, and in many others elsewhere, mental activities which are not explicitly perceived in all of their parts (PES-E, 277, PES-G II, 141; My emphasis).

Although we don’t distinctly (explicitly) perceive all parts of a manifold of mental phenomena, we distinctly (explicitly) perceive some of those parts, namely those that ‘stand out’ or are highlighted.

Brentano can apply this thought to solve the problem outlined. If I am conscious of a mental act, I always distinctly perceive a whole \( \{m_1 + v_2 + m_2\} \), one of whose elements, the first-order act \( m_1 \), is experientially highlighted. Hence, the first-order mental act is perceived distinctly when one perceives distinctly a complex of mental acts that contains it, while the second-order mental acts are only perceived indistinctly.39 This is phenomenologically plausible. To quote Goldman:

In the process of thinking about \( x \) there is already an implicit awareness that one is thinking about \( x \) (Goldman 1970, 96).

What does the ‘implicit awareness’ of one’s thinking about \( x \) amount to? The higher-order acts are only indistinctly presented and accepted as parts of a whole, while the first-order act stands out and is distinctly presented. Brentano does not offer an answer why \( m_1 \) stands out. But his theory can accommodate this phenomenological fact. This move allows Brentano to accept the assumptions of the Non-Duplication Argument without starting an infinite regress of higher-order acts.

Brentano’s theory of inner consciousness combines the idea that in inner consciousness higher- and lower-order acts are fused with Brentano’s theory of indistinct representation. This combination allows him to give a response to the regress problem that is (i) consistent with his own philosophical views and, as far as I can see, (ii) immune to the standard objections. The theory is complex, but this complexity is required to do justice to the phenomenon of inner consciousness.8

39 The object of \( m_1 \) is only presented once. It is presented in the higher-order act because the act contains the hearing.

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