

Chapter 10.

Brentano's System: The True, the Good, and the Beautiful

In what is quite possibly the most scholarly English-language overview of Brentano's philosophy, Liliana Albertazzi writes that it 'is the general opinion that Brentano's theories do not constitute a system' (Albertazzi 2006: 295). By content this is a mere sociological remark, but by tone it appears to be also an interpretive comment. In this concluding chapter, I want to suggest that the interpretive claim is false.

Several facts lend support to the interpretive claim. First and foremost is Brentano's vehement rejection of post-Kantian German philosophy, from Kant to Hegel, which is undoubtedly the most system-oriented period in the history of Western philosophy, but which Brentano saw as a period of philosophical decadence (see Brentano 1895). In addition, the fact that Brentano's thought was always in flux, 'never stood still' as Husserl pointed out in his reminiscences (Husserl 1919: 50), does not paint a picture of a systematic thinker drawing out consequences from top-down immutable principles. Finally, the chaotic state of Brentano's literary remains – with its bewildering variety of lecture notes, dictations, fragments, and letters – may also inspire a sense of a philosopher given to bottom-up bursts of ideas.

At the same time, it is worth noting that while Albertazzi's sociological remark is accurate across large swaths of Brentano scholarship, some have seemed to see a systematic streak in Brentano's work. When they were 22, Hugo Bergman

and Emil Utitz, two high-school friends converted to philosophy by Anton Marty's courses in Prague, started visiting the ageing Brentano (then 67) at his Schönbühel summer home.¹ In one of three reminiscences of Brentano he composed in his lifetime, Utitz writes:

He, who saw through the nonsense (*Unfug*) of standard systematic philosophy more sharply than anyone else, at the end of the day nonetheless wanted a system, one which would know the answer to all questions. (Utitz 1954: 84)²

More recently, Susan Gabriel writes:

Though he rejected the architectonic, speculative systems of Kant and Hegel, [Brentano] was himself a systematic philosopher with the big picture always in mind. Many useful studies of his thought have focused narrowly on this or that aspect of his system – his theory of intrinsic value, his intentionality thesis, his mereology, and so forth – but ... few have paid attention to the overarching themes and their interrelations. (Gabriel 2013: 247)

In the bulk of this chapter, I want to address Gabriel's 'complaint' by providing a condensed presentation of Brentano's uniform account of the true, the good, and the beautiful.

Utitz and Bergman also help explain away some of the factors inspiring the nonsystematic reading of Brentano. In particular, his distaste for German idealism appears to have been grounded not so much in the latter's systematic character, but in its tendency to reinterpret the phenomena in light of the system in order to protect the latter's stability. From Brentano's perspective, this was a theoretical vice that entrained a sort of dangerous insulation from reality. But as long as one guarded against this danger, systematicity as such was nothing to fear – quite the contrary. Utitz writes:

[Brentano] shattered the systematic character of philosophy, in order to substitute for it concrete local studies (*Einzelforschung*), yet he did not give up as such on the yearning/aspiration for a system (*Systemsehnsucht*). (Utitz 1954: 86)

It would seem Brentano deemed a bottom-up approach to be more intellectually honest, and at the same time retained the *goal* of producing an all-encompassing

system from so many bottom-up investigations. In this respect he embodies the idea of combining careful analysis as a means and grand synthesis as the end. This would explain Brentano's rejection of post-Kantian German philosophy, as well as the fact that his thought was always in flux.

As for the disparate character of his writings, Bergman tells us that 'Brentano did not like to publish books; as he once said, he hated the "secondary work" that was connected with proof-reading, referencing of quotations, etc.' (Bergman 1965: 94).

It is impossible, however, to discuss the question of whether Brentano had a system without getting clear on what it *means* for a philosopher to 'have a system.' A rather minimalist demand is that the philosopher in question have substantive theories in all the traditional areas of philosophy (metaphysics, epistemology, moral philosophy, and so on), or positions on all the classical problems of philosophy (knowledge of the external world, freedom and determinism, why be moral, and so on). A more demanding view of what it takes to have a system would require a measure of *unity* among the philosopher's various theories or positions. Such unity may manifest in recurrent appeal to similar patterns, notions, or 'moves,' or it may manifest in structural symmetries across different theories. In its ideal form, a philosophical system would provide structurally symmetric accounts of the true, the good, and the beautiful.

Looking back at the materials covered in previous chapters, it seems to me that by *all* these measures – including the strictest – Brentano did have 'a system.' For starters, he does have a theory in virtually every area of philosophy. Perhaps the one significant exception is political philosophy, where we have no significant contributions from Brentano to point to. One suspects, however, that this is primarily because Brentano took religion, more than anything else, to underpin the social order (see Brentano 1929: 10 [17]). As for recurring notions and moves, we have seen throughout this book Brentano's patterns of appeal to mereological notions, presentational modes (attitudinal properties), fittingness/correctness, the

direct grasp of primitives in inner perception, and the grounding of different areas of philosophy in the philosophy of consciousness. Most interestingly, one can clearly discern in Brentano's writings a systematic, unified approach to the true, the good, and the beautiful. The basic idea is that we understand the true, the good, and the beautiful when we gain a clear grasp of (i) the distinctive mental states targeting them and (ii) what success for such mental states amounts to. As we have seen, the true is that which it is fitting to believe, the good is that which it is fitting to have a pro attitude toward, and the beautiful is that with which it is fitting to be delighted.



For the third and last time in this book, I am going to quote this passage penned by the 36-year-old Brentano:

We see that ... the triad of ideals – the beautiful, the true, and the good – can well be explicated in terms of the system of mental faculties. Indeed, this is the only way in which it becomes fully intelligible (*erklären*)... (Brentano 1874: II, 122 [263]; my italics)

The 'system of mental faculties' Brentano alludes to is the threefold system of presentation, judgment, and interest. The program is to use presentation, judgment, and interest to render intelligible, respectively, the beautiful, the true, and the good.³ We have seen how this works at the end of Chap. 8. Here I merely want to recapitulate Brentano's main ideas in a way that highlights their systematicity.

In an important sense, the true does not in fact belong on the same list as the good and the beautiful. Keeping in mind the distinction between intentional act and intentional object, being good and being beautiful are ostensibly attributes of the object, whereas truth is ostensibly an attribute of the act. *If* one held that the intentional objects of judgment and belief are propositions, and propositions are true or false, *then* the true would belong with the good and the beautiful as an attribute of the object rather than the act. But Brentano does not think that the intentional objects of judgment and belief are propositions, and he takes truth to be originally an attribute of the judgments themselves (Brentano 1930: 6 [6]).

This incongruence is resolved by Brentano's theory that all judgments are existential. Since existence is a ostensibly an attribute of intentional objects rather than acts, existence belongs on the same plane as goodness and beauty. Ultimately, then, the philosophical theory of the true boils down to the task of rendering intelligible the notion of existence or realness.

Brentano's attempt to render existence intelligible has two facets. The first is destructive: Brentano simply denies that there is any such property as existence. The second is constructive: it aims to show how it can make sense, indeed be *true*, to say that (say) ducks exist. The main idea here could be summarized as follows. If a positive existential judgment attributed to a duck the property of existing, then given that there is no such property, the positive existential judgment would be false. Accordingly, a positive existential judgment concerning a duck must commit to the duck's existence without attributing to it the property of existing. In practice, this means that the judgment's existence-commitment must not be part of the judgment's content, but be rather built into its very mode or attitude. Accordingly, when we say that ducks exist, we are not saying that ducks have the property of existing; rather, we are saying that toward ducks it is appropriate to take an existence-committing attitude – in short, that it is fitting to believe in ducks.

This account attempts to render the notion of existence intelligible by analyzing it in terms of two other notions, namely, fittingness and belief-in. It would *succeed* in rendering it intelligible only if can make us understand (i) what it is to believe in something and (ii) what it is for a belief in something to be fitting. Now, we can try to elucidate these notions in terms of yet others, but ultimately our attempt at rendering existence intelligible must bottom out in certain notions that we understand, but not via analysis. The only way to understand a notion without analyzing it is by grasping directly the nature of the phenomenon it picks out. And indeed, according to Brentano we can understand what it is to believe in something by grasping directly, in inner perception, the felt difference between believing in something and either disbelieving in it or merely contemplating it. (This direct graspability of the nature of belief-in is crucial, because if we instead analyzed

belief-in as the existence-committal state, we would be using the notion of existence to elucidate the very same notion.) As for fittingness, we can grasp directly, again in inner perception, the felt difference between *manifestly fitting* (read: self-evident) beliefs and beliefs not so; we can then analyze fittingness in terms of manifest fittingness or self-evidence. At the foundation of our philosophical appreciation of the nature of the true, then is a direct grasp of (i) the character of belief-in and (ii) the nature of self-evidence. Philosophical analysis produces the conceptual bridge between these directly graspable phenomena and the notion of the true.



We find the same plan of attack in Brentano's attempt to render goodness intelligible. Recall the 1909 letter to Kraus:

It is incomprehensible to me what you seek to gain here with your belief in the existence of goodness with which the emotions are found to correspond. (Brentano 1966: 207)

That is, there is no such thing as mind-independent goodness. This is the destructive part of Brentano's tack. The constructive part is to show that our evaluative discourse is nonetheless sensible; indeed, we often speak *truly* when we say that such-and-such is, or would be, good.

How could that be? A state of positive interest – of will, positive emotion, or pleasure – involves commitment to the goodness of its object in the same way a positive judgment involves commitment to the reality or existence of its object. Since there is no such thing as mind-independent goodness, any state that attributed goodness to its object would be nonveridical. Thus positive interest states must cast their objects as good, but not by attributing to them the property of goodness. Instead, it must be built into the very mode or attitude of a positive interest state (intention, gladness, pleasure) that it is goodness-committal. Accordingly, when we say that freedom is good, we are not saying that freedom has the mind-independent property of being good; rather, we are saying that toward freedom it is appropriate to take a goodness-committing attitude – in short, that it is fitting to take a pro attitude toward freedom.

To understand the nature of the good, then, we must ultimately understand the nature of pro attitudes and their fittingness. Here again, Brentano offers an analysis of attitude-fittingness in terms of a practical analogue of self-evidence, what I have called self-imposition – a particularly *manifest* kind of attitude-fittingness. However, the nature of self-imposition, as well as the nature of a pro attitude, are to be grasped *directly* in inner perception. More specifically, what is required is inner perception of contrasts between (i) self-imposing attitude and non-self-imposing attitudes and (ii) pro attitudes and con attitudes (as well as mere contemplation). Ultimately, then, our understanding of the nature of goodness rests on inner-perceptual acquaintance with the natures of pro attitudes and their self-imposition; philosophical analysis creates the conceptual bridge between the notion of goodness and these directly-graspable natures.

It is easy to appreciate the evident symmetry between Brentano's attempts to render intelligible the true and the good. In both cases, direct acquaintance with a distinctive kind of mental state, and the manifest fittingness of entering that state in response to certain things, grounds our grasp of the relevant notion. At the same time, though, Brentano also recognizes an important asymmetry between the true and the good. The domain of value is inherently different from the domain of reality in that while an intentional object is either real or unreal, it need not be either good or bad – objects differ also in their *degree* of goodness or badness (in a way they do not differ in their degree of existence). Correspondingly, however, our interest states divide not only into goodness-committal and badness-committal ones, but include in addition states which are *better*-committal. These are the states Brentano calls 'preference,' and for which there is no analogue in the sphere of judgment. Ultimately, then, understanding the realm of value requires also direct acquaintance with the nature of preference – obtained, naturally, through inner perception of contrasts with mental states other than preference.

The same blend of symmetry and asymmetry attends the domain of beauty, which has its own peculiarities, but nonetheless submits to the same two fundamental Brentanian ideas. First: there is no such thing as mind-independent

property of beauty. But second: there are aesthetic truths, made true by facts about what it is fitting to be delighted with. So far, the account parallels the case of truth and goodness. The big asymmetry here, however, is that the notions of (i) delight and (ii) (manifest) delight-fittingness are mostly analyzable in terms of already familiar notions. Delight itself is analyzed in terms of the combination of first-order presentation and second-order joy in this presentation. Since there is no standard of fittingness for presentations, delight's fittingness reduces to the fittingness of the second-order joy, that is, to the familiar kind of pro-attitude-fittingness. The only new primitive here, not already invoked in the account of the true and the good, is the (first-order) *mere* presentation of the object. Presumably, the nature of mere presentation is to be grasped directly through inner perception of the contrast between merely presenting something and believing in it, disbelieving in it, taking a pro attitude toward it, or taking a con attitude toward it.

In sum, Brentano's program for rendering intelligible the true, the good, and the beautiful depends on the combination of (i) direct inner-perceptual grasp of six phenomena and (ii) philosophical analysis of truth, goodness, and beauty claims in terms of those six phenomena. The six phenomena are: mere-presentation, belief-in, pro attitude, preference, judgment-fittingness, interest-fittingness. The philosophical analysis follows the 'fitting mental response' format in each case.

As I hope this summary makes clear, Brentano's philosophical thought is in reality extraordinarily systematic. If the goal of a philosophical 'grand system' in the style of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy is to provide a unified, structurally symmetric account of the true, the good, and the beautiful, then Brentano clearly *had* a system. Indeed, in this rather demanding sense of the term, Brentano's may well be the last grand system of Western philosophy. (It is hard to think of a later Western thinker who not only produced theories of the true, the good, and the beautiful, but did so in a way that ensures unity and symmetry among them.) At the same time, Brentano marries this Germanic yearning for a total system with a more British empiricist sensibility: it is crucial to his system that the six primitive, directly graspable notions are *acquired rather than innate*.⁴ Interestingly,

though, they are acquired not by outer but *inner* perception. Brentano's is to that extent a kind of *introverted* empiricism, baking a certain *Cartesian* orientation into the system as well.



Brentano's system features a number of pressure points, the most notable of which should be collected and highlighted one last time.

First, the notion of a merely distinguishable part is problematic. On the one hand, such parts have no independent existence in the thing itself – they are distinguishable merely in thought. On the other hand, when it is true that x is a distinguishable part of y , it is true *cum fundamentum in re* – there is something about y that makes that statement true. The result, then, is that claims about merely distinguishable parts can be true *cum fundamentum in re*, but the relevant *fundamentum* is not any *part* that exists *in re*. The notion feels unstable. I have suggested on Brentano's behalf that the notion be understood as trying to articulate *structure* which outstrips *partition*. But this is just to open a window on a whole new project of (i) showing that the notion of structure that goes beyond having qualitatively different parts makes sense and (ii) explaining what exactly such structure consist in.

Secondly, Brentano's theory of judgment seems to entail that the psychological reality of a belief that either some baby or some puppy is cute involves the subject disbelieving in a mereological sum of a correct disbelief in a cute baby and a correct disbelief in a cute puppy. Crazy! We are entitled to speculate that someone in the history of humanity has believed that either some baby or some puppy is cute without so much as *possessing* the concept of correct belief.

Thirdly, Brentano's objectual theory of all three basic types of mental state faces the major challenge of explaining the *data* of systematicity. It seems to be a *datum* that no person is capable of grasping the idea that John loves Mary without being able to grasp the idea that Mary loves John. The capacity to grasp the two

notions arises simultaneously, and this does not seem to be an accident. By the lights of Brentano's objectual theory, however, one is the capacity to complete one individual, a Mary-loving John, while the other is the capacity to contemplate a separate individual, a John-loving Mary. On the face of it, it is unclear why the capacity to contemplate Joe and the capacity to contemplate Schmoe should arise simultaneously as a matter of psychological necessity.

Fourthly, Brentano's theory of existence talk produces a difficulty regarding the assessment of such seemingly straightforward existence truths. According to the theory, to assert that the Eiffel Tower exists is, ultimately, to say that whoever adopted a self-evident doxastic attitude toward the Eiffel Tower would adopt the belief-in attitude. It is unclear, however, how we are supposed to assess the claim that whoever adopted a self-evident doxastic attitude toward the Eiffel Tower would adopt the belief-in attitude, without presupposing that we have an independent grasp on what it means for the Eiffel Tower to exist, given that nobody like us *can* have a self-evident doxastic attitude toward the Eiffel Tower.

Fifthly, there are problems with Brentano's reist ontology, one of the crown jewels of his system (and a retrospective partial justification of his theories of judgment and existence). Outstanding among these problems is the fact that it does not seem to have the resources to recover the compelling idea that *The Spatially Extended Eiffel Tower*, if it is a real concrete particular at all, is one whose existence depends on that of *The Eiffel Tower*, rather than the other way round.

Sixthly, Brentano's theory of will and emotion entails a reclassification of desire as an emotion – a somewhat uncomfortable classification given the felt difference between desire as such paradigmatic emotions as sadness and anger.

Finally, there is the problem of the dual status, or Janus face, of the keystone ethical notion of *self-imposition*. If we insist on objectivism about what is good and what is not, and interpret self-imposition as conceptually linked to goodness objectivistically construed, there is not much chance that self-imposition could be manifest to inner perception. But if instead we insist on its inner-perceptual

manifestness of self-imposition, we lose any reasonable hope for objectivism about value. We cannot have it both ways.

There are of course many other difficulties, of various levels of significance, with Brentano's system. But these seven seem to me the deepest and most troubling. There is, in particular, a deep tension in Brentano's attempt to defend a kind of objectivism and observer-independence about existents and goods, while ultimately analyzing existence and goodness in terms of inner-perceptible self-evidence and self-imposition. One *could*, of course, believe in a preestablished harmony between observer-independent existents and goods, on the one hand, and inner-perceptually manifest self-evidence and self-imposition, on the other. But a philosophical system undergirded by this manner of supposition, magnificent though that system might otherwise be, would be little more than an intricate intellectual edifice held together by an act of faith.

The weight of these considerations makes it impossible for me to *accept* Brentano's system. All the same, I think of the system as a monumental intellectual achievement, among the finest of the West. With insight and invention, it brings a vast number of punctilious analyses into stable equilibrium within a unified framework for understanding the true, the good, and the beautiful. In doing so, it combines exuberant ambitiousness regarding the *aims* of philosophical inquiry with painstaking meticulousness with regard to the *pursuit* of those aims. In all these respects, Brentano's philosophical system, even if ultimately hard to embrace, may serve us well as a *model* – a model of a philosophical endeavor both rigorous in its means and exhilarating in its ends.

¹ Brentano kept a correspondence with both for the rest of his life (as well as with many other young philosophers hailing from the centers of Brentanian orthodoxy in Prague and Innsbruck). For the historical background, see Baumgartner 2017, Dewalque 2017, Fréchette 2017, and Janoušek and Rollinger 2017.

² Thanks to Arnaud Dewalque, who pointed this passage out to me. Bergman, meanwhile, included an expansive chapter on Brentano in his last book, *Systems in Post-Kantian Philosophy* (Bergman 1979).

³ Note the unusual order in which the true, the good, and the beautiful are listed in the passage; the reason is that they are listed so as to reflect the order of the types of mental state used to render them intelligible. (Recall that in Brentano's taxonomy, presentation is treated as the most basic mental state, judgment the second most basic, and interest the least basic. The reason is that judgment and interest presuppose presentation but presentation does not presuppose them, while interest presupposes judgment but judgment does not presuppose interest.)

⁴ Brentano's ardent commitment to empiricism goes back to the very beginning of his career. In his thirteenth habilitation thesis, he already states: 'Nothing is in the understanding that was not earlier in one of the senses' (Brentano 1866: 139).