

Chapter 5.

Metaontology: Existence

Brentano's theory of judgment serves as a springboard for his conception of reality, indeed for his ontology. It does so, indirectly, by inspiring a very specific *metaontology*. To a first approximation, ontology is concerned with what exists, metaontology with what it means to say that something exists. So understood, metaontology has been dominated by three views: (i) existence as a substantive first-order property that some things have and some do not, (ii) existence as a formal first-order property that everything has, and (iii) existence as a second-order property of existents' distinctive properties. Brentano offers a fourth and completely different approach to existence talk, however, one which falls naturally out of his theory of judgment. The purpose of this chapter is to present and motivate Brentano's approach.

1. Introduction: Metaontology and Existence Talk

Moral philosophy is usefully divided into ethics and metaethics. Oversimplifying considerably, the distinction is this: ethics is concerned with what is good, metaethics with what it means to say that something is good. The goal of ethics is to produce a comprehensive list of goods. Metaethics concerns a more fundamental question: when we say that *x* is good, what exactly are we saying? In a way, ethics is concerned with the *extension* of the concept GOOD, metaethics with its *intension*.

This is an oversimplification in at least two ways. First, ethics and metaethics are concerned with other normative concepts, such as RIGHT, VIRTUE, and REASONS. Secondly, metaethics deals with other issues, such as moral epistemology – how we can come to know which things are good. Still, there is a clear sense in which answering the question of what exactly we are doing when we say that something is good lies at the heart of metaethics.

A similar division of labor may be applied to ontology and metaontology. Again oversimplifying, ontology is concerned with what exists, metaontology with what it means to say that something exists. The goal of ontology is to produce a comprehensive list of existents; that of metaontology is to answer the question of what exactly we are saying when we say that x exists. To that extent, ontology is concerned with the extension of the concept EXISTENCE, metaontology with its intension.

One way in which this oversimplifies is that ontology may well be concerned with other concepts, such as GROUNDING, FUNDAMENTALITY, or ESSENCE.¹ Another is that metaontology is also concerned with other issues, notably the methodology of ontology.² Nonetheless, there is a sense in which at the heart of metaontology lies the question ‘when we say that x exists, what exactly are we saying?’ We may think of this as the *organizing question* of metaontology.

To this question, there are three prominent answers in the extant literature. According to the first, to say that x exists is to attribute to x a substantive, discriminating first-order property that some things have and some do not (Meinong 1904, Parsons 1980). According to the second, it is to attribute a second-order property of existents’ distinctive properties or of the concept designed to pick them out (Frege 1884, Russell 1905b). According to the third, more popular in recent discussions, to say that x exists is to attribute to x a formal, *undiscriminating* first-order property that everything has (Williamson 2002, van Inwagen 2003). Each of these has met with strong resistance and faces extraordinary objections, but each has also been admirably defended. Just by way of motivating the search for an

alternative approach such as Brentano's, I now present a brief survey of the three familiar views and some of their immediate difficulties.



The simplest view is that to say that x exists is to attribute a substantive property to x . When I say that Leo Messi is brilliant, I attribute to Messi a certain property, the property of being brilliant. Some players have that property and some do not. In exactly the same manner, when I say that Messi exists, I attribute to him a property, this time the property of existing. Brilliant, existent, short, Argentinean – those are all Messi-esque attributes on a par. Accordingly, existential claims are at bottom of a kind with predicative claims: 'ducks are cute' and 'there are ducks' *look* different, but the latter is just an unhelpful rendering of 'ducks are existent.'

Dissatisfaction with this approach is rife. There are technical problems to do with negative existentials and existential generalization. From 'Jimmy is not Argentinean' I can infer 'There is a non-Argentinean.' If existential claims work just like predicative ones, from 'Shrek does not exist' I should be able to infer 'There is a nonexistent.' But this requires a distinction between 'there is' and 'exists' that many find odious (Quine 1948), including Brentano (1930: 127-8 [112], 1933: 29-31 [32-3]). Proponents of the view are of course well aware that their position requires a distinction between 'there is' and 'exists' and embrace it unflinchingly. It remains that *natural language* does not seem to draw such a distinction – 'There are ghosts' and 'Ghosts exist' seem to say the same thing – so this view of existence talk cannot quite be right for existence talk *in natural language*. There are also nontechnical problems: as Hume (1739 I,II,vi) noted, the idea of existence adds nothing to the idea of an object. The idea of a cute duck is different from the idea of a duck, which means that the idea of cuteness contributes something to the idea of a cute duck. But the idea of an existing duck is nowise different from the idea of a duck; so it is unclear what the idea of existence is supposed to contribute.

Perhaps the most dominant view in twentieth-century philosophy has been that, in saying that x exists, we are attributing a property not to x , but either (i) to x 's

distinctive, individuating *properties* or (ii) to the *concept* of *x*. In the first case, we attribute the property of being (co-)instantiated; in the second, that of (successfully) referring. In both versions, existence is construed as a *second-order* property, since it is not a property of *x* itself but of some properties of *x* or the concept of *x*. Thus, when I say that Messi exists, what I am doing is attributing to the properties that individuate Messi (whatever they are) the property of being (co-)instantiated, or else attributing to the concept MESSI the property of (successfully) referring. Likewise, when I say that dragons do not exist, I am saying that nothing co-instantiates all the properties definitive of dragons, or else that the concept DRAGON is empty.

This approach raises its own set of difficulties. Some are technical and pertain to its application to singular existentials. The approach seems to suggest that the proper name 'Messi' is semantically associated with certain properties. For example, if the truth of 'Messi exists' requires that the property of being the only five-time Ballon d'Or winner be instantiated, then it seems that 'Messi' refers partly via the description 'the only five-time Ballon d'Or winner.' Likewise, if the truth of 'Messi exists' requires that the concept of Messi refer, then it seems that 'Messi' refers partly in virtue of expressing that concept. But many philosophers deny that 'Messi' is associated with *any* properties, descriptions, or concepts; they maintain that it refers *directly* to the individual himself, without any such mediators (Kripke 1972). There are also nontechnical problems with the approach: it implies that in saying that Messi exists, we are not saying anything *about Messi*; in fact, we are not speaking of Messi at all, but of some different (though associated) entity. What we are speaking of is not even a concrete particular, but a property cluster or a concept. This feels wrong: saying that *x* exists feels like a comment on *x*, not on something else suitably related to *x*.³ When we exclaim excitedly that the Higgs boson exists, it is the discovery of the boson itself that excites us. Perhaps most problematically, 'Messi exists' can be true even if there are no such things as properties and concepts, as some nominalists maintain, whereas 'The Messirific properties are co-instantiated' and 'The concept MESSI refers' cannot.⁴ The problem here is *not* that

such nominalism is so plausible that its rejection is an unwelcome commitment of the second-order property view; rather, it is that metaontological views should not have *any* first-order ontological commitments – they should not prejudge, or be beholden to, first-order questions. (Compare a metaethical theory whose account of what we do when we say that something is good has any chance of working only if consequentialism is false!)

A view gathering momentum in recent metaontology is that existence is a first-order property of things, but not a substantive, discriminating one that divides entities into two subsets, those which have the property and those which do not. Rather, it is a formal or ‘pleonastic’ property that everything has. Other logical or formal properties are like that as well: the property of being self-identical does not divide entities into two subsets either.

One problem for this view concerns intuitively true singular negative existentials, such as ‘Robin Hood did not exist.’ On some (popular!) views, proper names such as ‘Robin Hood,’ at least if they were not explicitly introduced as shorthand for certain descriptions, are *directly referential*. This means that their referent is the only contribution they make to the meaning of sentences in which they appear. On this view, ‘Santa Claus is coming to town’ is meaningless rather than false, because there is no proposition it expresses. If we accept this view, as many do, then it is unclear how someone who holds that *everything* exists can obtain the result that ‘Robin Hood does not exist’ is true. If Robin Hood is part of this ‘everything,’ then ‘Robin Hood exists’ is true, and so (on most logics) ‘Robin Hood does not exist’ is false. If, on the other hand, Robin Hood is not part of everything, then ‘Robin Hood does not exist’ is as meaningless as ‘Santa Claus is coming to town.’ This presents the proponent of the view that existence is a property that everything has with some tough choices: either she adopts a descriptivist view of proper names, or she embraces the consequence that ‘Robin Hood does not exist’ is untrue.

To be sure, proponents of each view have offered various responses to these and other problems. I do not wish to dwell on these matters here. My principal aim here is to articulate and motivate Brentano's alternative approach. Brentano worked on this in two main periods of his life. His doctoral dissertation was on the notion of existence in Aristotle (Brentano 1862), but he returned to the topic forty years later, composing and dictating a number of important essays and notes (see Brentano 1930, 1933). The basic idea is quite original, and flows nicely from his account of judgment. However, the resulting view has received essentially no attention outside the circles of Brentano scholarship. My goal here is to motivate it to a wider audience and show that it merits serious consideration.

2. Mental Existence-Commitment: Brentano's Attitudinal Account

To say that x exists is to perform a certain linguistic act. The performance of this act commits the performer to x 's existence. To that extent, we may think of the act of saying that x exists as *linguistic existence-commitment*. Saying ' x exists' is of course only one form of linguistic existence-commitment. Others include asserting 'there is an x ,' 'there exist x s,' ' x is,' 'the x s are existent,' and so on.

It is, of course, possible to commit oneself to the existence of x without saying anything. I may think to myself that x exists and keep the thought to myself. This would also be a form of existence-commitment, but not *linguistic* existence-commitment. Rather, would be *mental* existence-commitment. Mental existence-commitment is commitment to something's existence *in thought*, whereas linguistic existence-commitment is commitment to something's existence *in language*. Like many modern philosophers of mind, Brentano presupposes the priority of the mental over the linguistic, taking linguistic representation to derive from mental representation (see esp. Brentano 1956). Accordingly, he starts from an account of mental existence-commitment, and devises his account of linguistic existence-commitment on its basis.

When I think to myself that Messi exists, I mentally commit to the existence of Messi. The three familiar views share the assumption that in doing so, I attribute a property to something. (They differ on what property is attributed and what it is attributed to, but they agree that some property is attributed to something.) Underlying this is an even deeper assumption: that the commitment to Messi's existence is an aspect of the relevant thought's *content*. The property attributed is a constituent of the content of my thought. On the first-order views, the content may be represented as <Existence, Messi>; on the second-order one, as <Instantiatedness, Messirific properties> or <Referentiality, MESSI>. Either way, some existence-related property figures in the content of existence-committing mental acts.

Brentano rejects this, as we saw in Chap. 4. For him, mental commitment to something's existence is not an aspect of the relevant mental state's content, but of its attitude. When you mentally commit to Messi's existence, your mental state is that of belief in Messi, not that of belief in Messi's existence. Messi by himself exhausts the content of your belief in Messi – no property is invoked in the content. (That is why belief-in is an *objectual* attitude.) The existential commitment is encoded in the very attitude of believing-in, and neither needs nor can be replicated within the content. In this Brentano's approach to mental existence-commitment is fundamentally different from the three more familiar views.

Obviously, not all attitudes are existence-committal. Among attitudes that do not incorporate commitment to *x*'s existence, some expressly involve the opposite commitment, namely to *x*'s *nonexistence*; others are 'existentially silent.' I would love to have a gold-coated private jet; my desire for such a jet, and my contemplation of it, commit me neither to the jet's existence nor to its nonexistence. They are noncommittal on the question of the gold-coated jet's existence. By contrast, my disbelief in Shrek is not neutral in this way. It *takes a stand* on Shrek's existence – a negative stand. It encodes mental *nonexistence*-commitment.

Brentano's attitudinal account of mental existence-commitment does raise a problem. If mental existence-commitment is an aspect of existence-committing acts' *content*, then linguistic existence-commitment can be construed in terms of linguistic acts with the very same content. But this cannot work if mental existence-commitment is an aspect of mental acts' *attitude*. A structurally similar account of linguistic existence-commitment would still be possible if there were an existence-committing *force* in language to parallel the existence-committing *attitude* in thought. But no such force appears to exist. Perhaps the force characteristic of *assertion* could be thought of as a kind of linguistic representing-as-*true*. But that is not quite yet representing-as-existent. If there were a special tone of voice, such that uttering 'Messi' in it would convey the utterer's commitment to Messi's existence, or a special punctuation symbol, a kind of 'existence stroke' akin to Frege's 'judgment stroke,' such that prefacing a noun phrase with it conveyed the author's commitment to the existence of the object denoted by the phrase, then that tone or symbol could underpin an account of linguistic existence-commitment structurally similar to Brentano's account of mental linguistic-commitment. But in fact there are no such linguistic devices, and it is instructive that at the linguistic level existence-commitment appears always to be achieved through an aspect of content, with the aid of precisely such words as 'exists.' So what exactly are we doing when we add the word 'exists' after 'Messi,' as though we have added a verb like 'kicks' or 'scores,' if in reality there is no *activity* or *state* denoted by 'exists' (as Brentano maintains)? Answering this question is crucial for providing an answer to what I described above as the organizing question of metaontology: when we say that *x* exists, what exactly are we saying? That is after all a question about *saying*, so it concerns linguistic existence-commitment, existence-commitment in the representational medium in which the community of ontologists conducts its inquiry.

3. Linguistic Existence-Commitment: Brentano's Fitting Belief-in Account

For Brentano, in asserting 'x exists,' we are not saying that x has the property of existing, nor that some x-distinctive properties are instantiated. What we are saying is this: that x is a suitable object of acceptance, that is, an appropriate intentional object of belief-in. We are saying that belief-in would be the correct attitude to take toward x – that the right attitude to take toward x is that of believing in it. If x is to be an intentional object of belief-in or disbelief-in, it ought to be the object of belief-in.

By the same token, when we say that y does *not* exist, what we are saying is that if y is to be an intentional object of belief-in or disbelief-in, it ought to be the object of *disbelief-in*. The correct attitude to take toward y is that of disbelieving in it. In that sense, y is a suitable (intentional) object of rejection or disbelief-in.

Disbelief is appropriate to it. The general picture, then, is this:

Let us call the area for which affirmative judgment is fitting/appropriate (*passende*) the area of the existent (*Existierenden*) ... and the area for which the negative judgment is fitting/appropriate the area of the nonexistent. (Brentano 1930: 24 [21])

This passage, from an 1889 lecture to the Vienna Philosophical Society, states the view in terms of fittingness. Fifteen years later, in a 1904 essay, Brentano puts the view in terms of correctness:

'The existent' (*Existerendes*), in the proper sense, is not a name that names something, but rather amounts to 'something correctly affirmatively thought-of' (*richtig positiv Gedachtes*), 'something correctly accepted' (*richtig Anerkanntes*). (Brentano 1930: 79 [68])

In general, *richtig* ('correct') is Brentano's favorite term in these contexts. However, in at least one place he explicitly offers as synonyms *konvenient*, *passend*, and *entsprechend* – more or less interchangeably translatable as 'appropriate,' 'suitable,' or 'fitting' (Brentano 1889: 76 [74]).

This account of existence talk may be summarized, or sloganized, with what I will call *Brentano's Dictum*:

(BD) To be is to be a fitting object of belief-in.

Although I formulate Brentano's Dictum in the material mode of speech, it is intended in the first instance not an account of what existence itself consists in, but as an account of existence talk comes down to. It cannot be an account of the nature of the property of existing, of course, since Brentano disbelieves in such a property. More generally, there is no way to generate an account of the nature of existence itself, or of what existence consists in. There is no way to 'get underneath existence,' as Jonathan Schaffer once put it to me. All we can do is explicate what we do when we engage in linguistic existence-commitment. That is what BD is *really* trying to do.⁵ Note well: in BD, 'object' means *intentional object*, not *entity* or *concrete particular*. In this sense of 'object,' the Eiffel Tower is an object of my acceptance in the same sense my wife is the object of my affection.

The way I understand BD, it is *only* an account of what we do when we make an existence claim. On the one hand, it is not intended to help us go about actually discovering what exists. That is, it is not a *guide* to ontological commitment. (More on this in §5.2.) In addition, BD is not intended as a substantive account of existence. It is not an attempt to capture the intrinsic nature of a property of existence. That is, the idea is *not* that existence is the property whose nature is being-fittingly-acceptable. Indeed, *there is no such property as existence* – though there are of course existents. Following Kant, Brentano puts this point by saying that existence is not a 'real predicate':

In calling an object good, we do not thereby give it a material/real (*sachliches*) predicate, somewhat as we do when we call something red or round or warm or thinking. The expressions good and bad work in this respect like existent and nonexistent. We do not seek with these to add a further determination to the relevant thing; rather, we want to say that whoever accepts [believes in] a certain thing, and rejects [disbelieves in] another, judges truly. (Brentano 1952: 144 [90])

There is no material predicate of existence, that is, a nonformal, discriminating predicate that separates objects into two groups, those that satisfy it and those that do not. This is precisely why existence-commitment cannot be part of the content of a mental state. There is not some aspect of the world, or of things in it, that we are

trying to capture with our concept *EXISTENT*. And yet existence talk is perfectly meaningful, and existence claims are often true. It is true that ducks exist. The only way to make sense of the notion that it is true that ducks exist, without saying what makes it true is the fact that ducks have the property of existing, is to say that what is true is the fact that belief in ducks is fitting.

To see this, suppose that mental commitment to the existence of *x* were a content feature, say a matter of the belief that *x* exists. Then it would be natural to hold that linguistic existence-commitment is a matter of asserting the kind of sentence that expressed that belief and thus shared the same *content* as it. But if mental commitment to the existence of *x* is attitudinally encoded in the existence-committal state, then uttering a sentence with the same content as that state accomplishes nothing. To replicate the intentional structure of the relevant mental state in a linguistic utterance, there would have to exist an existence-committal force, so that one could simply utter '*x*' with that force. Since no such force exists, committing linguistically to *x*'s existence must rather take the form of commenting on the kind of mental attitude it would be appropriate or correct to take toward *x*.

It is useful, in this context, to distinguish two explicitly contrastive readings of BD:

(BD₁) To be is to be a fitting *rather than unfitting* object of belief-in.

(BD₂) To be is to be a fitting object of belief-in *rather than disbelief-in (or contemplation)*.

BD₁ is true, insofar as all existents are fitting rather than unfitting objects of belief-in. But BD₁ does not *explain* existence talk. It does not *account* for what it means to say that something exists. What explains that is BD₂, the thought that to say that *x* exists is to take a stand on which attitude it would be correct to take toward *x*, which attitude is *appropriate* for *x*.

To that extent, Brentano's account of existence talk can be thought of as a sort of *fitting-attitude account*. Such accounts have recently proliferated in the

metaethical literature (Jacobson 2011). The basic idea is that for x to be good is for it to be a fitting object of approval or the like pro attitude; for x to be bad is for it to be a fitting object of disapproval or the like con attitude. As we will see in Chap. 8, Brentano is quite clearly a fitting-attitude theorist *of value*, indeed may well be the first such. And as we will see in Chap. 8 and 10, his accounts of the existent and of the good are *supposed* to be structurally symmetrical, something he is quite explicit on in several places (see Seron 2008). Accordingly, we would be quite justified to consider Brentano's approach, as captured in BD₂, a fitting-attitude account of linguistic existence-commitment.⁶

Brentano's account faces an immediate challenge: what does it mean for belief-in to be fitting or correct? The most natural answer is of course unavailable to Brentano. The most natural answer is that it is fitting or correct to believe in x just when x really exists. (Compare: it is appropriate for us to believe that p just when p is true.) Adopting this answer would result in immediate circularity, however: what it is for a belief in x to be fitting is just for x to exist, but what it is for x to exist is for it to be fitting to believe in x . Upshot: Brentano must have some other, less obvious account of belief fittingness.

4. Further Developments: What Is Belief Fittingness?

Brentano's account of belief fittingness proceeds in two steps. The first is an analysis of belief fittingness in terms of self-evidence (*Evidenz*). The second is a primitivist account of self-evidence. I take these up in reverse order. I will then raise a leftover circularity concern and address it on Brentano's behalf.

4.1. The Nature of Self-Evidence

Brentano's approach to self-evidence remained more or less constant throughout his career. From the first extended discussion in *Psychology II* (Chap. 3, §§2-4) to a series of dictations on the topic in the second week of July 1915 (twenty months

before he died), Brentano's views both on what *is* self-evident and what it is to be self-evident changed little. Recall from Chap. 1 that inner perception is self-evident. Since perception is for him a species of judgment, we can say that inner-perceptual states constitute one kind of self-evident judgment. The only other kind is constituted by certain a priori judgments, notably logical and mathematical (see, e.g., Brentano 1930: 148 [130]). These judgments' status as self-evident *entrains* a number of enviable features: infallibility, certainty, immediacy, and so on. But these features are not what self-evidence *amounts* to. On the contrary, self-evidence is more basic than them and *underlies* them:

What is self-evident cannot be in error. And where something is self-evident there cannot be doubt. But neither freedom from error nor freedom from doubt makes a judgment a self-evident judgment... (1930: 144 [126])

Inner perception is infallible *because* it is self-evident. Belief in the law of contradiction is certain *because* it is self-evident. But their being self-evident goes deeper than their infallibility and certainty.

If self-evidence is not *just* infallibility, certainty, immediacy, and so on, but something deeper that underlies and explains these, then what is it? According to Brentano, the notion of self-evidence is primitive and unanalyzable. In consequence, we cannot come to grasp what self-evidence is by digesting the right philosophical theory of it. Nonetheless, there are certain intellectual exercises we can perform that enable us to grasp *directly* the nature of self-evidence.⁷

To see how this works, consider the 'revelation theory' of color (Johnston 1992). According to it, it is a mistake to try to appreciate the nature of colors by articulating the right philosophical theory (whether in terms of objective reflection/refraction properties, dispositions to elicit color experiences, categorical bases of such dispositions, or anything else). To appreciate the nature of green, says the revelation theorist, we just need *to look*. When we look at a paradigmatically green apple, the nature of greenness *reveals* itself to us. Regardless of whether we ultimately wish to subscribe to a revelation theory, the notion that a property may

be such that its nature can be appreciated through direct awareness, rather than through a philosophical theory, is rather plausible. Brentano's view is that this is exactly the case with the property of self-evidence – and also, as it happens, with the property of greenness.

Now, the reader might be forgiven if s/he feels that there is a certain disanalogy between the cases of greenness and self-evidence. In the former, when we are told that we will grasp directly the nature of greenness just by looking, we know immediately what to do, and whether we have succeeded in capturing that which we were promised we would grasp simply by looking. In the case of self-evidence, however, it is not immediately obvious what we are supposed to do and what would count as having successfully done that. This may raise a suspicion about a revelation theory of self-evidence: if self-evidence *reveals* its nature, should it not be *immediately obvious* that – and how – it does?

Brentano is aware of this objection and responds, somewhat underwhelmingly, that self-evidence revealed itself in an immediately obvious way to certain philosophers, notably Aristotle (Brentano 1952: 157 [98]). But there is a deeper point to be made here. Arguably, the immediate plausibility of the notion that colors 'reveal' their nature is not due entirely to our visually witnessing the *intrinsic nature* of the colors. Rather, it is due in part to the rife and sharp *contrasts* that we witness among different colors in our environment. Imagine a planet – call it Green-Earth – much like ours but for two differences: (i) all objects there are shades of black and white and (ii) all are naturally illuminated by green light (perhaps because of the special properties of Green-Earth's sun), instead of the standard white sunlight we are used to here on Earth (so-called D65).⁸ Importantly, the visual apparatus of Green-Earthlings, from sensory transducers to high visual cortex, is identical to ours. We can compare normal visual experiences of objects on Earth and on Green-Earth by considering the scenes portrayed in Figure 5.1.⁹



Figure 5.1a. Earthly Objects



Figure 5.1b. Green-Earthly Objects

Consider now pairs of Green-Earthly and green Earthly objects that reflect exactly the same light (and, *ex hypothesi*, are processed by the exact same apparatus). We may stipulate that the front items in Figures 5.1a and 5.1b answer to this description. It seems to me that although Earthlings may well grasp directly the nature of green just by looking at the relevant green Earthly objects, Green-Earthlings are ill positioned to grasp the nature of green just by looking at the relevant Green-Earthly objects (despite the identity of physical reflection and refraction properties and of ‘opponent processing’ apparatus).¹⁰ More precisely, perhaps, Green-Earthlings cannot grasp the nature of green *as such*, that is, the determinable of which all specific green shades are determinates. What is missing on Green-Earth, it would seem, is the proper contrast: since everything is green-tinged, there are no objects (surfaces, volumes, films) completely ‘free of green.’¹¹

If this is right, then direct grasp of F’s nature requires the right kind of contrast. Sometimes the world is set up so that the contrast occurs naturally (as is the case with colors on Earth), but sometimes it is the philosopher’s task to adduce the contrast. This is done by dwelling on certain examples of pairs of phenomena, whether real or thought-experimental, with the goal of ‘helping’ one’s interlocutor to grasp the nature of F for herself. The result is a kind of ‘assisted revelation’ account of the nature of F.

Brentano's approach to the direct grasp of self-evidence is precisely of this 'assisted revelation' variety:

The correct method is one that we use in many other cases where we are concerned with a *simple* mark or characteristic. We will have to solve the problem by considering a multiplicity of judgments which are self-evident and then *juxtaposing and contrasting* (*vergleichend gegenüber stellen*) them with other judgments which lack this distinguishing characteristic. This is what we do, after all, when we make clear to ourselves what is red or not red... (Brentano 1930: 143 [125], my italics; see also 1928: 3 [4])

'Simple' here is meant as the antonym of 'composite': a simple characteristic is one that cannot be accounted for in terms of more elemental constituents. Brentano's contention is that self-evidence – like other incomposite, primitive features – can only be appreciated through suitable contrasts (Brentano 1956: 111). In particular, although self-evident beliefs involve a *feeling of strong confidence*, indeed of being *compelled to believe*, that feeling can attach to other beliefs as a result of habit, indoctrination, wishful thinking, or prejudice. When we hold in memory or imagination a *self-evident* confident belief and a *non-self-evident* confident belief, and contrast the two, we can directly grasp the feature present only in the former:

Descartes' example of [self-evidence] is the knowledge we possess when we are aware of thinking, seeing, hearing, wanting or feeling something. No matter how far I go with my doubt, he said, I still cannot doubt that I doubt. And he did not mean by this that I just have an incontrovertible urge (*unüberwindlichen Drang*) to believe in my thinking, but rather that I perceive with complete certainty the fact of my thinking. A comparison with a deep-rooted prejudice brings out the characteristic that contrasts [the inner-perceptual judgment] with a case of blind urge to believe; be the urge as powerful as you like, something is still missing here that shows up there [in the inner-perceptual judgment], and that is simply what we label self-evidence. (Brentano 1928: 3 [4])

A college student may feel equal confidence in 'I think, therefore I am,' which he learned yesterday, as in 'Shaving makes the hair grow back thicker,' which his father imparted on him upon his sixteenth birthday. Nonetheless, when we as theoreticians consider these two beliefs side by side, as it were, we 'see' that although they are similar insofar as they both exhibit an acute feeling of certainty,

they are also crucially different. More precisely, in juxtaposing the two in thought we become directly acquainted with a dimension along which they differ. That dimension we label 'self-evidence.' As theoreticians, we focus our mind on the right incomposite feature by imagining ourselves thinking 'I think, therefore I am,' imagining ourselves thinking 'Shaving makes the hair grow back thicker,' and comparing and contrasting these two imagined judgments. There is no other way for us to truly grasp what self-evidence is.

4.2. *Self-Evidence and Belief Fittingness*

So much, then, for Brentano's primitivist account of self-evidence. For Brentano, the fittingness or correctness of a belief can be analyzed in terms of self-evidence:

Truth belongs to the judgments of the correct/fitting judge – to the judgments, therefore, of someone who judges in the way he who made his judgments on the matter with self-evidence would. (Brentano 1930: 139 [122])

This passage combines two ideas. The first, which does not directly concern us, is that a judgment's truth comes down to its correctness/fittingness. The other, which does concern us, is that a token judgment's correctness/fittingness is a matter of its conforming to a type-identical judgment that is self-evident.

More precisely, the view is this. A person may make a judgment regarding *x*'s existence – that is, decide to believe or disbelieve in *x* – in one of two ways: *with* or *without* self-evidence. If she makes the judgment with self-evidence, then whatever she ends up deciding, her judgment is fitting. For example, if she decides to believe in *x*, then since she judged the matter with self-evidence, her belief in *x* is self-evident and a fortiori fitting. Now, if the person makes the judgment *without* self-evidence, then for her resulting judgment to be fitting, a certain counterfactual must hold: namely, that *if* she judged with self-evidence, she *would* end up making the same judgment – or more exactly, that *if anyone* judged with self-evidence, *s/he* would end up making that judgment. For example, if she decides to believe in *x*, then

her belief is fitting iff were any subject S to judge on *x*'s existence with self-evidence, S would come to believe in *x*.

Suppose I believe that my wife is sad now (or rather believe *in* my wife's current sadness). My wife herself may know with self-evidence that she is sad, since she can inner-perceive her sadness, and inner perception is self-evident. My own belief in her sadness, however, is not self-evident, since I *cannot* inner-perceive her sadness. Still, the following counterfactual is still true: if my wife were to judge on whether she is sad or not, she would come to self-evidently believe in her sadness. It is because this counterfactual is true, claims Brentano, that *my* belief in my wife's sadness is fitting.

It is a consequence of this account that one cannot truly appreciate the nature of belief fittingness without grasping the nature of self-evidence, since fittingness is analyzed in terms of self-evidence. Therefore, it is also a consequence that one cannot appreciate the nature of belief fittingness without encountering in inner perception the contrast between self-evident and non-self-evident beliefs-in (Brentano 1952: 141-2 [88]).

This account of belief fittingness faces an immediate difficulty, raised by Chisholm (1986: 39), but apparently aired already by Ehrenfels (Bacigalupo 2015: 56). It is that in some cases it may be impossible for *anyone* to make a judgment on whether *x* exists with self-evidence. Indeed, given that for Brentano self-evidence extends only to inner perception and certain a priori beliefs, there seem to be large tracts of our a posteriori knowledge for which self-evidence is simply not in the cards. Belief in ducks, for example, seems eminently fitting, yet nobody can hope to have this belief with self-evidence.¹²

Chisholm himself deems that Brentano's only option here is to resort to God's a priori insight into all things (Ibid.). The reason my belief in ducks is fitting, on this view, is that God self-evidently believes in ducks. Insofar as this response makes Brentano's analysis beholden to theism, however, it is not particularly satisfactory – though one might suggest that the analysis does not quite commit to God's

existence, but only her conceivability. Now, Brentano himself was of course a theist (see Brentano 1929), but in general he seems not to appreciate the move of parachuting God into the dialectic to solve otherwise insurmountable philosophical problems. And as we will see in Chap. 8, he explicitly opposes the appeal to God in a parallel dialectical setting to do with the nature of goodness.

It might be suggested that appeal to God is not Brentano's only option here. Another option is to appeal to *counterpossibles*, that is, counterfactuals whose antecedents are *necessarily* rather than contingently false. Consider the claim that if, *per impossibile*, I formed a judgment on the matter of ducks' existence with self-evidence, the judgment I would form is that of believing in ducks. For all Brentano might care, one might suggest, the analysis of belief fittingness could invoke such counterpossibles. The idea would be that when we say that belief in *x* is fitting, what we are saying is that if, perhaps *per impossibile*, someone judged with self-evidence on *x*'s existence, s/he would believe in *x*.¹³

The main problem with this is that it is unclear how we are supposed to evaluate the plausibility of such counterpossibles. When we plug the emerging view of belief fittingness into the fitting belief-in account, we obtain the following: to say that *x* exists is to say that belief-in is the attitude that would be adopted toward *x* by someone who, perhaps *per impossibile*, judged the matter of *x*'s existence with self-evidence. Thus, to say that ducks exist is to say that if, *per impossibile*, anyone could make a judgment on the existence of ducks with self-evidence, then the attitude she would take toward ducks is that of belief-in (rather than disbelief-in). To evaluate the claim that ducks exist, then, it would seem that we must first evaluate the claim that the relevant impossible subject would have a self-evident belief in ducks. But how are we supposed to know what attitude this impossible subject would take toward ducks? If we suppose that she would believe in ducks on the grounds that *it is true that there are ducks*, then we fall into circularity again.

It might be suggested that Brentano would have done better to account for fittingness without reference to self-evidence, appealing instead to obligation, the

'epistemic ought,' evidence, or related epistemic notions (see Sosa 2009 and McHugh 2014). The idea might be, say, that it is fitting to believe in ducks because the weight of evidence recommends such a belief. The obvious problem here, however, is that nothing prevents (i) the existence of things we have insufficient evidence to believe in, nor (ii) our having substantial evidence for the existence of things which do not in fact exist. If a belief's fittingness were a matter of its being supported by evidence, then (i) would involve existents in which it is not fitting to believe and (ii) would involve fitting beliefs in nonexistent. It is perhaps natural to embrace such possibilities, but not if one *also* wants to hold that to be is to be a fitting object of belief-in.

Consider an example. It is perfectly possible that the world doubled in size instantaneously last night at midnight. If this event of instantaneous cosmic doubling did occur, and existence is to be accounted for in terms of fitting belief-in, then Brentano would have to say that it is fitting to believe in that event. However, given that the event would entail the instantaneous doubling of our measuring instruments, the meter in Paris, and so on, it is in principle impossible to produce any evidence for its occurrence. In that scenario, then, it would be fitting to believe in an event for which no evidence is possible. It is probably because of such limitations on the appeal to evidence and similar epistemic notions that Brentano instead appealed to *self-evidence*, which, recall, ensures infallibility. As we have seen, however, analyzing fittingness in terms of self-evidence creates a problem in cases where self-evidence is not in the cards for us, as in the belief in ducks.

What to do? In my opinion, Brentano's best move here is to go primitivist about belief-fittingness *directly* and construe self-evidence as just a particularly acute or manifest instance of fittingness. On this view, the only way to grasp the nature of belief fittingness is to contemplate side by side fitting and unfitting beliefs in things, and this is easiest to do with the most starkly fitting beliefs, namely, the self-evident ones. To be clear, fittingness itself does not come in degrees – a belief in *x* is either fitting or unfitting. But how *manifest* a belief's fittingness is does come in degrees. The most manifestly fitting beliefs are the self-evident ones. Our college

student's belief in his own existence is fitting in an inner-perceptibly manifest way in which his belief in hair growing back thicker after shaving is not. By contemplating the contrast between these two beliefs, and other belief pairs like them, we grasp directly the nature of manifestly fitting belief. We then understand a fitting belief as one which is like the manifestly fitting ones in the relevant respect but is not manifestly such (or better: as one which is like a *highly* manifestly fitting belief in the relevant respect but is *less* manifest).

This kind of fittingness primitivism is not ideal, insofar as it leaves the extrapolation from manifestly fitting (i.e., self-evident) judgments to merely fitting ones somewhat opaque. The resulting account of existence talk would certainly benefit from an elaboration on the nature of this extrapolation. It does seem to me, however, a more promising route than appeal to either God or counterpossibles. In any case, Brentano would profit here from stating that his is not an account of how *we come to know* that something exists, but of *what we are saying* when we say that something exists. In reality, my sense is that Brentano's account of existence talk is actually intended to pave the way to a kind of classical foundationalism about existential *knowledge* (see Brentano 1928).¹⁴ All the same, the account of existence talk many well be more plausible than the corresponding account of existential knowledge.

4.3. Existence and the Nature of Belief-in

I have attempted to show that Brentano's account of existence talk in terms of fitting belief-in need not fall prey to circularity. So far, however, all I have shown is (at most!) that there is no circularity hidden in the requirement that beliefs-in be *fitting*. There might still be some circularity hidden in the requirement that the fitting state be the objectual attitude of *belief-in*. After all, in Chap. 3-4 we have characterized belief-in as the state whose distinctive, essential feature is the attitudinal property of presenting-as-existent. If we plug this into what I have called Brentano's Dictum, we obtain: to be is to be a fitting object of presentation-as-existent. Brentano's

fitting belief-in account, then, might be circular after all. For its answer to the organizing question of metaontology seems to be this: when we say that *x* exists, what we are saying is that the correct attitude to take toward *x* is that attitude which presents-as-existent *x*.

The response *must* be that 'existent' is not really a constituent of 'presenting-as-existent.' As in Chap. 2, we must read this locution as syntactically simple, with 'existent' appearing in it as a morphological but not syntactic part. The expression 'presenting-as-existent' is useful as a 'philosophical wink' of sort, to give a sense of the property we are trying to point at. But strictly speaking, 'presenting-as-existent' is just a label, picking out the relevant property directly, not by mediation of a description such as (the non-hyphenated!) 'presenting as existent.'

This response may work, but only if the compositional understanding of 'presenting-as-existent' is not the *only* way we have of understanding which property is meant. There must be some other way for us to understand 'presenting-as-existent.' And indeed, Brentano does offer us such a way. In fact, Brentano himself never characterizes the attitudinal property essential to judgment in terms of presenting-as-existent – or for that matter, in any other terms. For him, that property is another primitive we can only grasp directly, using the same contrastive method we use to grasp the nature of self-evidence:

... judgment is an irreducible (*irreduzibler*) act, directed at an object, that cannot be further analyzed. In other words, a judgment consists in a specific relation to the object whose nature can be elucidated only by examples and which can be expressed by 'accepting' and 'rejecting.' (Brentano 1956: 100)

It is by inner-perceiving judgments and other (nonjudicative) conscious states, then 'recreating' both types of state in episodic memory and attending to the difference between them, that we come to grasp the distinctive nature of judgment. Someone who has never judged cannot grasp the nature of judgment – not by understanding the expression 'present-as-existent' and not otherwise.¹⁵

In conclusion, Brentano's gambit is to account for existence talk in terms of fitting belief-in, and then claim that both the notion of fittingness and the notion of belief-in can be understood without prior understanding of what existence is. The notion of fittingness can be understood in terms of self-evidence, which is grasped directly, and the notion of belief-in is grasped directly as well. Both self-evidence and belief-in are primitive notions we can understand, ultimately, only thanks to inner-perceptual encounter. This is why already in the *Psychology* Brentano promises, somewhat cryptically, that an empiricist treatment of the concept EXISTENCE as ultimately acquired by perception, albeit inner, is workable:

Some have held that this concept [EXISTENCE] cannot be derived from experience... [But] we will find that this concept undoubtedly is derived from experience, but from *inner experience*, and we acquire it *with regard to judgment*. (Brentano 1874: II, 52 [210]; my italics; see also Brentano 1952 §40)

Brentano does not develop the idea any further in the *Psychology*. Against the background of this section's discussion, what he has in mind should be clear though: inner perception of judgments, especially self-evident ones, is the ultimate basis on which we acquire our concept of existence.

If we use boldface to mark primitive notions, graspable only via direct encounter (against appropriate contrasts), Brentano's fully explicit account of existence talk can be put as follows: to say that x exists is to say that **belief-in** is the attitude that would be adopted toward x by someone who judged the matter with **self-evidence**. I have recommended, however, that Brentano retreat to the thesis that to say that x exists is to say that **belief-in** is the attitude it would be **fitting** to adopt toward x , with self-evidence entering the picture only heuristically, as a particularly stark instance of inner-perceptible fittingness.

5. Advantages and Disadvantages of the Fitting Belief-in Account

Brentano's account is very different from the three more standard approaches to existence. For one thing, at least two of those standard approaches offer theories of the nature of *existence itself*, whereas Brentano's fitting-attitude account is primarily a theory of *existence talk*. What it says about existence itself is, first, that there is no property of existence, and second, that although there are existents, there is nothing that *makes* them existents – they just exist. Accordingly, there is no way to 'get underneath' existence, and all we can hope to obtain in this area is illumination of existence thought and discourse – that is, of the nature of mental and linguistic commitment to existence. Furthermore, Brentano's account differs substantially from the three standard approaches also specifically on the nature of such existence-commitment. Most notably, for Brentano mental existence-commitment does not involve attribution of a property to anything. There is a sense in which linguistic existence-commitment does: when we assert that *x* exists, we implicitly attribute the property of fittingness to the belief in *x*; indeed, *x* itself is attributed the property of being a suitable object for belief-in. At the same time, this is very different from the property-attribution involved in the more standard accounts of existence talk, insofar as the property attributed is not ostensibly ontological (it is not a property such as existing or being instantiated). In this section, I consider the potential advantages (§5.1) and disadvantages (§5.2) of Brentano's account.

5.1. Avoiding the Problems of Traditional Accounts

Brentano's unusual approach avoids many of the central problems bedeviling the three better-known approaches discussed in §1. To be sure, there may be other solutions to these problems – the literature on this is enormous. But it is remarkable that many of these problems do not even *arise* within Brentano's fitting belief-in framework.

Two issues were raised in §1 with the first view, existence as a substantive first-order property. The first concerned the treatment of negative existentials, such as 'There are no dragons.' The view under consideration interprets this to mean

something like 'Dragons have the property of not existing.' The latter, however, entails, by simple existential generalization, the incoherent-sounding 'There is an x , such that x has the property of not existing.' There may be ways around this, notably by devising formal systems in which existential generalization is not an automatically valid inference. It is noteworthy, though, that the problem does not even arise in the Brentanian framework. For Brentano interprets 'There are no dragons' as meaning something like 'It is appropriate to disbelieve in dragons.' The latter does *not* entail 'There is an x , such that it is appropriate to disbelieve in x .' For the expression 'appropriate to disbelieve in' creates an intensional context, certainly a context where existential generalization is not supported.¹⁶ Accordingly, negative existentials do not yield the aforementioned incoherent-sounding result.¹⁷

The second problem for the 'substantive first-order predicate view' was Hume's observation that the idea of existence 'adds nothing': asked to contemplate not just a duck, but an existent duck, we end up contemplating the same thing we did before – a duck. This militates against the notion that EXISTENCE picks out anything substantive. It is clear that Brentano's fitting belief-in account respects Hume's observation. Indeed, the notion that existence is not a *content feature* of existence-committal mental states can *explain* the fact that there is no *content difference* between the ideas of a duck and of an existent duck.

The second view mentioned in §1, existence as a second-order property, raised two issues as well. The first concerned its compatibility with direct-reference accounts of proper names. We noted, for example, that if 'Messi exists' simply means 'The property of being the only five-time Ballon d'Or winner is instantiated,' then 'Messi' would seem to refer partly via the description 'the only five-time Ballon d'Or winner' – contrary to the most popular view of nominal reference. (If 'Messi exists' means rather the same as a much more complicated statement of the form 'The properties of being F_1, \dots, F_n are co-instantiated,' this would suggest that 'Messi' refers through the corresponding much more complex description.) In contrast, there is nothing about the fitting belief-in account that requires one to take any position on how 'Messi' refers. Suppose 'Messi' refers thanks to a causal chain

leading to a baptismal event taking place in 1987 in Rosario. Then ‘Messi exists’ can still mean the same as ‘It is fitting to believe in Messi.’

The second problem with the second-order view was that it cast ‘Messi exists’ as not about Messi, but about his Messirific properties or the concept MESSI. Here it is less *immediately* clear that Brentano’s account fares meaningfully better. For in construing ‘Messi exists’ as meaning ‘It is fitting to believe in Messi,’ it casts the former as primarily about a certain belief, not a certain footballer. One might try to defend Brentano by noting that ‘Messi’ still *appears* in ‘It is fitting to believe in Messi’ (whereas it does not in ‘The Messirific properties are co-instantiated’). To that extent, we may say that the statement is still *secondarily* about Messi (Brentano would say that it is ‘obliquely’ about Messi), which is perhaps an advantage over the second-order property view.¹⁸ A more important advantage, arguably, is that all this concerns only *linguistic* existence-commitment. As far as *mental* existence-commitment is concerned, it is clear that the *belief in* Messi involves mental reference to Messi himself, not to any associated entities. Since linguistic existence-commitment derives from mental existence-commitment, this means that the fundamental, nonderivative form of existence-commitment does refer to Messi himself; the proponent of the second-order property view cannot boast the same.

As for the third view mentioned in §1, existence as a *formal* first-order property, I have argued that it is hard to see how it could explain the acquisition of the concept of existence. The model of differential perceptual interaction with existents and nonexistents is a nonstarter, while the genus-et-differentia model cannot designate any relevant genus (that is, any genus of which existence, construed as a formal property that everything has, is a species). As we have seen in §4, however, Brentano *can* offer a compositional story about EXISTENCE in terms of genus et differentia: the genus is (potential) belief-in, the ‘differentium’ is simply fittingness. Ultimately, all the relevant notions are understood in terms of logical vocabulary plus two primitive concepts, belief-in and self-evidence, which *are* acquired by differential perceptual interaction, namely, inner-perceptual interaction

with (i) beliefs-in and other mental states (for the concept BELIEF-IN) and (ii) self-evident (dis)beliefs and non-self-evident ones (for SELF-EVIDENCE).

5.2. *Objections and Replies*

At bottom, though, what motivates the fitting belief-in account of linguistic existence-commitment is not just the problems facing other views in the area. It is also the attitudinal account of *mental* existence-commitment. As noted in §3, if mental commitment to the existence of x is attitudinally encoded, then linguistic commitment to x 's existence must take the form of commenting on the kind of mental attitude it would be fitting to take toward x .

Brentano's account does face certain difficulties of its own, however. Paralleling the thought that 'Messi exists' should be about Messi and not some associated entities, for example, is the thought that 'Messi exists' should be construed as a descriptive rather than normative statement. It comments on how things are, not how they ought to be. Construing it as a claim about the kind of attitudes we *ought* to take – plainly a normative statement – seems to that extent false to the phenomenology of making existential pronouncements.

I take this to be a genuine liability for the Brentanian account. Its force is somewhat blunted by the fact that the fundamental form of existence-commitment in Brentano's account is *mental* existence-commitment, and the latter is still entirely descriptive. Belief-in has a mind-to-world rather than world-to-mind direction of fit. Still, it would clearly be preferable, all things considered, to have an account of existence *talk* that cast it as descriptive talk.

Another potential worry is that Brentano's Dictum is a rather shallow precept, nowise illuminating or facilitating the conduct of ontological inquiry. Consider Quine's Dictum: to be is to be the value of a variable (Quine 1948). Its formulation has been extraordinarily useful for the field of ontology in the second half of the twentieth century, as it allowed tractable formulations of many debates

which were previously hard to pin down. The question of whether there are numbers, for example, became greatly sharpened when recast as the question of whether quantification over numbers would be indispensable in our final theory of the world. The latter question is a more concretely tractable question that has given rise to technically sophisticated debates. It is a question on which progress can more straightforwardly be claimed.¹⁹ It is unclear how Brentano's Dictum could be similarly helpful. Told that to be is to be a suitable object of belief-in, we can recast the question of numbers as the question of whether it would be fitting to adopt the attitude of believing in numbers. But this moves us forward not one inch from the initial question. Indeed, when we consider whether it would be fitting for us to believe in numbers, we simply consider the arguments for and against the existence of numbers! To that extent, Brentano's Dictum provides us with no methodological guidance in the conduct of ontological inquiry.

There are two possible and somewhat conflicting responses to this objection. The first rejects the notion that methodological fecundity of the sort Quine's Dictum boasts is a desirable feature of a metaontological position, insisting that what we really want from our metaontology is *total neutrality*: we want our metaontology to avoid prejudging any first-order ontological questions. These two desiderata seem to be in tension. Consider that Quine (1948) himself took his quantificational approach to pave the way for an argument that numbers must in fact be included in our ontology. Granted, Quine's Dictum does not quite *deliver* a pro-numeric ontology. But nor is it exactly *neutral* on the question, as it reshapes the dialectic in a way that turns out to favor numbers. Brentano's Dictum on its own, in contrast, does not affect the dialectic in any way. The dialectical landscape remains pristinely untouched after we adopt the fitting belief-in account of existence talk, and this may be seen as a plus.

The second possible response to the worry under discussion is that Brentano's metaontology is in fact far from neutral, and paves the way to its own first-order ontological gains, though ones different from Quine's. In particular, the fact that the fundamental form of existence-commitment involves an objectual

rather than propositional attitude paves the way, within Brentano's framework, to a nominalist ontology in which only individual objects are admitted. Propositions and states of affairs, almost automatically needed to account for *propositional* attitudes and their truth, are peremptorily avoided when the only attitudes we need to account for are objectual. We have encountered some of these considerations in Chap. 4, and will develop them in more detail in Chap. 6.



Perhaps more deeply than these specific objections, what might give pause to some is the fact that the fitting belief-in account is directly inspired, and motivated, by Brentano's thoroughly heterodox theory of judgment. The notions that all beliefs are existential, and that no beliefs have propositional content, are, all said and done, quite hard to swallow. If, all said and done, one chooses to stick with a more traditional conception of cognition, how attractive does the fitting belief-in account of existence talk look?

The answer, it seems to me, is 'very attractive.' It is true that the fitting belief-in account is inspired by, and meshes very nicely with, the peculiarities of Brentano's theory of judgment. But in no way does the former *logically depend* upon the latter. The only thing it depends on is the claim that belief-in is irreducible to existential belief-that. For as long as belief-in is a real and distinctive kind of state in our psychological repertoire, one can still maintain that to say that *x* exists is to say that the right attitude to take toward *x* is that of believing in it. That is, the view is still available to one, and still exhibits all the aforementioned advantages, even if one has no truck with (the rest of) Brentano's theory of judgment. The fitting belief-in account simply does not need the claim that *all* beliefs are beliefs-in, as long as *some* beliefs are. Interestingly, some philosophers have indeed argued that belief-in does not reduce to existential belief-that without making any claim about converse reduction (Szabó 2003).²⁰

There is another commitment of Brentano's that seems entirely superfluous to his fundamental approach – so much so that up till now I saw no need to mention

it. Brentano takes tense at face value: for him, it is inappropriate to believe that there are dinosaurs, though it is perfectly appropriate to believe that there *were* dinosaurs. As we saw in Chap. 3, temporal modality is for Brentano an attitudinal affair just as much as ontological status:

... we must designate temporal differences as modes of [intentionality]. Anyone who considered past, present, and future as differences in objects would be just as mistaken as someone who looked upon existence and nonexistence as real attributes. (Brentano 1911: 143 [279]; see also 1976: 128 [107])

Just as mental existence-commitment and nonexistence-commitment are a matter of distinct mental states presenting-as-existent and presenting-as-nonexistent their objects, so temporal orientation must be a matter of distinct mental states presenting-as-past, presenting-as-present, or presenting-as-future theirs. From this perspective, there is no difference in *what* one believes when one believes that there *are* dinosaurs or one believes that there *were* dinosaurs. The difference is *not* that between believing in present-dinosaurs and believing in past-dinosaurs. Rather, it is an entirely attitudinal difference (Brentano 1933: 9 [18]), a matter of presenting-as-presently-existing a dinosaur versus presenting-as-pastly-existing a dinosaur. As Brentano puts it, the former is a ‘judgment in the *modus praesens*’ whereas the latter is a judgment in the preterite mode.

I belabor this point because Brentano’s *real* dictum is actually this: to be is to be a fitting object of *modus-praesens* belief-in. Thus we find the following in a 1914 dictation:

If we ask, ‘What, then, *is* there in the strict sense of the word?,’ the answer must be: ‘That which is correctly (*mit Recht*) accepted in the *modus praesens*.’ (Brentano 1933: 18 [24])

Brentano’s full answer to the ‘organizing question’ of metaontology, then, is this: to say that *x* exists is to say that it would be fitting to believe in *x* in the *modus praesens*.²¹ This excludes attitudinally past-directed and future-directed beliefs-in from the scope of attitudes the fittingness of taking which captures existence.

This twist on Brentano's Dictum seems to pave the way to *presentism*, the thesis that only present beings should be included in our ontology. And eternalists, who maintain that past and future objects can have the exact same ontological status as present ones, may object to it. However, this is why I introduced the topic of Brentano's presentist twist as another completely superfluous commitment of his metaontology, something which Brentano happened to be attracted to but which does not go to the core of the general approach of understanding existence talk in terms of fitting belief-in. An eternalist could readily adopt the fitting belief-in approach to existence talk, and simply resist the presentist twist in Brentano's own version of the view.

Conclusion

Once we rid Brentano's metaontology of some inessential baggage – the presentist twist and the thesis that *all* judgments are beliefs-in – we obtain a view of existence talk that ought to be attractive to any fair-minded observer. Two main liabilities still attach to it, to my mind. The first is that it casts what seem like existential *assertions* as disguised normative claims, claims about what attitudes we ought to have; this is counterintuitive and contrary to the phenomenology of engaging in existence talk. The second is its account of fitting belief-in in terms of what a person who judged with self-evidence would believe, which is problematic in contexts where self-evidence is impossible for us.

Nonetheless, the more familiar theories in this area are not without their problems and liabilities. As in most philosophical areas, the logical space seems exhausted by positions which contain at least one hard-to-swallow component. So these problems attending Brentano's fitting belief-in account should not be taken as disqualifying. As the old French adage says: when you analyze it's upsetting, when you compare it's consoling.

What is most striking to me in Brentano's metaontology is, *again*, how extraordinarily original it is. Like his mereology and his theory of judgment, it seems to come out of nowhere – it is, as far as I can tell, presaged by nothing in the history of philosophy. And yet upon close examination the case for it is no weaker than standard fare in the area. The view is no less believable than its more familiar competitors.



In previous chapters, we have seen several recurring philosophical devices in Brentano's theorizing, notably the appeal to mereological notions to elucidate intricate structures and the use of resources provided by attitudinal properties to illuminate the nature of fundamental mental phenomena. In this chapter came to the fore another recurring Brentanian theme, namely, that the most fundamental notions of a philosophical system cannot be grasped through appreciation of the right philosophical theory; instead, they must be treated as primitives which can only be grasped through direct encounter. In practice, this means they must be experienced by oneself and brought into sharper relief through appropriate contrasts.

In Chap. 2, we saw a remark to this effect by Brentano regarding the notion of intentionality (recall – or reconsult – the quote from Brentano 1966: 339). In this chapter, we saw even more developed primitivist accounts of self-evidence and of judgment. We will see further instances of this in later chapters. The general idea is expressed clearly by Brentano already in his 1889 lecture on truth. He closes the lecture with three general morals, the final of which is this:

Many believe that ... elucidation (*Verdeutlichung*) [of a concept] always requires some general determination [i.e., definition by *genus et differentia*], and they forget that the ultimate and most effective means of elucidation must always consist in appeal to the individual's intuition... What would be the use of trying to elucidate the concepts of red and blue if I could not present one with something red or with something blue? (Brentano 1930: 29 [24-5])

Twenty-seven years later, just a year before his death, Brentano distills the basic point as follows:

The basis for understanding any discourse consists not in explication (*Erklärung*) through words but in explication through the objects themselves, provided these objects are presented for comparison and thus for grasping a common general concept. (Brentano 1933: 205 [150])

The basic point is that grasping things themselves, rather than words or concepts for them, must ultimately ground our conceptual scheme, hence be the foundation for any genuine understanding of reality. As it happens, for Brentano it is only through inner perception that we can grasp things themselves – because of the constitutive connection between inner perception and its objects that we encountered in Chap. 1. Accordingly, genuine understanding of truth, goodness, and beauty must all be traced back, ultimately, to some inner-perceptual encounter with corresponding phenomena. In the case of truth, we can theorize truth in terms of existence, existence in terms of fitting belief-in, and the fittingness of a belief in terms of self-evidence; but for the whole theoretical edifice to be intelligible, we must also grasp directly the natures of self-evidence and of believing-in.²²

¹ See Schaffer 2009 for a view of ontology as concerned primarily (perhaps even exclusively) with grounding and fundamentality rather than existence, and Lowe 2008 for the view that essence is a central part of what ontology is about.

² Thus, debates over Quine's (1948) quantificational method vs. Armstrong's (2004) truthmaker method belong within the sphere of metaontology.

³ See Frege 1884: 67 for the explicit claim that 'x exists' is not about x, and Thomasson 2015 Chap. 2 for criticism of it.

⁴ Thanks to Kevin Mulligan for pointing out this particular difficulty.

⁵ I use the material mode to parallel 'Quine's Dictum' (to be is to be the value of a variable) and 'Alexander's Dictum' (to be is to be causally efficacious) (more on that in §5).

⁶ It might be suggested that Brentano's account is rather a form of 'metaontological expressivism,' since it casts linguistic existence-commitment as a matter of expressing an attitude rather than describing a state of affairs. However, this would be very different from expressivism as standardly

conceived (in metaethics and elsewhere), since the attitude expressed, believing-in, is *cognitive* rather than conative or emotive.

⁷ In modern analytic philosophy, there is another philosophical technique commonly thought to be capable of illuminating primitive notions. This is to fully specify its theoretical role within our theory of the relevant phenomena. This is the technique regimented through so-called Ramsey sentences (see Lewis 1972). Brentano himself does not consider this option, but although I do not have the space to properly delve into this issue here, there are arguments in the extant literature that characterization via theoretical role cannot be the *only* technique for characterizing primitives, and direct grasp or acquaintance must always be appealed to at some point (see Newman 1928). To that extent, it is an advantage of Brentano's primitivism that it appeals to this latter technique.

⁸ In saying that all objects on Green Earth *are* black and white, I am presupposing an objectivist conception of color. If one rejects such a conception, the correct way to describe Green Earth would be to say that the objects there would be black and white on Earth, or something of that sort.

⁹ It might be that our visual system is so designed that it would quickly 'edit out' all greenness from the awareness of Green-Earthly objects. If so, the thought experiment would have to include the further condition that Green-Earthlings' visual system is unlike ours in that respect. More directly, we might just stipulate that Green-Earthlings' visual experience is suffused with a green tinge – exactly as portrayed in Figure 5b. Whether Green-Earthlings, so conceived, are nomologically possible is immaterial to the thought experiment.

¹⁰ Observe the distribution of hyphens in this sentence!

¹¹ Thus we can more easily imagine how Green-Earthlings may directly grasp the nature of the darker-than and lighter-than *color relations* than to imagine how they directly grasp the nature of color *property* green.

¹² Furthermore, as far as assertoric as opposed to apodictic judgment is concerned, self-evidence shows up only in inner perception, and inner perception produces only *positive* judgments (you cannot inner-perceive what is not taking place in your mind). Accordingly, self-evidence is not in the cards for *any* assertoric negative judgment! (Thanks to Géraldine Carranante for pointing this out to me.)

¹³ Less dramatically, one might suggest appealing to logical as opposed to nomic counterfactuals, claiming that even though it is nomically impossible for us to judge on the existence of ducks with self-evidence, it *is* logically possible (this seems to be suggested by Bacigalupo 2015: 56-7). Recall from Chap. 1, however, that, according to Brentano, the only reason inner perception is self-evident is that there is a constitutive connection between the perceiving and the perceived. If so, the laws of nature have little to do with the possibility of self-evident a posteriori belief. What makes that possible is rather a metaphysical relation between belief and believed in certain cases. For us to have self-evident beliefs in ducks, then, the same metaphysical relation would have to hold. That is, we would have to undergo perceptual experiences of which ducks are merely distinguishable parts. Setting aside phenomenal externalism (e.g., Dretske 1996), which is very contrary to the spirit of Brentano's philosophy of mind, it is an open question whether it is *logically* possible for us to have ducks as constituents of our conscious states.

are committed precisely to this view. But first, in phenomenal externalism the ducks appear to be rather separable parts of the conscious states, not distinctional parts. And secondly, even in this more modest reading, phenomenal externalism is completely contrary to.

¹⁴ Brentano's foundationalism is not explicitly billed as foundationalism about specifically existential knowledge, but since for Brentano all judgment is existential and knowledge is a kind of judgment, it follows that for him all knowledge is existential anyway.

¹⁵ Perhaps more accurately: someone could understand the notion of judgment as the notion of a mental state which is either a belief-in (acceptance) or a disbelief-in (rejection). But the notions of belief-in and disbelief-in can be understood only thanks to 'assisted revelation.'

¹⁶ It is not immediately clear to me whether it also fails to support *salva veritate* substitution. Consider the following inference: it is appropriate to disbelieve in Shrek; Shrek = Jimmy's favorite animated character; therefore, it is appropriate to disbelieve in Jimmy's favorite animated character. At first glance, this seems like a valid inference. Certainly its 'positive' counterpart is. Thus, the following inference seems valid: it is appropriate to believe in Phosphorus; Phosphorus = Hesperus; therefore, it is appropriate to believe in Hesperus. It remains that, at least in the 'negative' case, existential generalizations is clearly failed.

¹⁷ Note that, interestingly, 'appropriate to believe in' is extensional, and certainly does support existential generalization. From 'It is appropriate to believe in Santa Claus' it seems intuitively permissible to infer 'There is an *x*, such that it is appropriate to believe in *x*.'

¹⁸ Relatedly, 'It is fitting to believe in Messi' has a close neighbor which is *primarily* about Messi, namely, 'Messi is a fitting object of belief-in.' It would probably be unwise, though, to construe 'Messi exists' as meaning the same as 'Messi is a fitting object of belief-in.' For then 'Shrek does not exist' would have to mean the same as 'Shrek is a fitting object of disbelief-in,' which seems to quantify over Shrek, thus yielding again the results entrained by the first-order substantive view that we tried to avoid.

¹⁹ Similar remarks apply to 'Alexander's Dictum': to be is to be causally efficacious (Kim 1992). This principle has allowed progress in particular in the ontology of properties, but has been invoked (sometimes under the name 'the eleatic principle') also in discussions of individuals, events, and so on.

²⁰ If belief-in reduces to existential belief-that, then saying that *x* exists iff it is fitting of believe in *x* just means that *x* exists iff it is fitting to believe in the existence of *x*, which seems to appeal to the notion of existence in elucidating that very notion.

²¹ If we use, for the sake of convenience, the eternalist's 'exists,' we may say that first presents-as-presently-nonexistent a dinosaur, whereas the second presents-as-pastly-existent a dinosaur. Of course, Brentano would reject this way of describing the attitudinal properties in question, since he thinks that 'pastly-existent' is nonsense.

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