

## Brentano's soul and the unity of consciousness

### ABSTRACT

In the following paper, I discuss Fisette's reconstruction of Brentano's view, according to which Brentano's conception of consciousness and of its unity is based on the presupposition that consciousness has a bearer, i.e. the soul. First, I identify Fisette's real target (sect.1) and challenge his conception of the mental agent as central to Brentano's account (sect. 2 and 3). In section 4, I formulate some doubts about the sources used by Fisette, and, in section 5, I propose another reading of the relation between the unity of consciousness and the mental agent in the late Brentano.

**Keywords:** Philosophy of mind; Brentano; Soul; Consciousness.

### RESUMO

No seguinte artigo, discuto a reconstrução de Fisette da visão de Brentano, de acordo com a qual a concepção da consciência de Brentano e a sua unidade é baseada na pressuposição de que a consciência tenha um portador, i.e., uma alma. Primeiramente, identifico o alvo real de Fisette (sec. 1) e desafio a sua concepção de agente mental como central para a teoria de Brentano (sec. 2 e 3). Na seção 4, formulo algumas dúvidas sobre as fontes usadas por Fisette, e na seção 5, proponho outra leitura da relação entre a unidade da consciência e o agente mental no Brentano tardio.

**Palavras-chave:** Filosofia da mente; Brentano; Alma; Consciência.

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Not only has Brentano's account of consciousness had significant influence in recent years; it also foresaw many of the contemporary debates about the nature of consciousness. Indeed, much of the recent literature on Brentano emerged as part of the work on higher-order theories (HOT) of thought and perception, same-order theories of consciousness, representationalism, intentionalism, and self-representationalism. For all these theories of consciousness and intentionality, Brentano's writings on intentionality and consciousness are often seen to illustrate one aspect or another of the respective theories. Since these theories work with very different assumptions, it might seem that Brentano's conception of consciousness suffers from at least some inconsistencies or, more reasonably, that some of his writings leave room for interpretation. Fisette's paper tries to shed light on Brentano's account of consciousness, and proposes a reconstruction of his view inspired by some of his later ideas on the nature of consciousness and the soul. In what follows, I identify Fisette's real target (sect. 1) and challenge his conception of the mental agent as central to Brentano's account (sect. 2 and 3). In section 4, I formulate some doubts about the sources used by Fisette, and in section 5 I propose another reading of the relation between the unity of consciousness and the mental agent in the late Brentano.

## The target

Fisette's aim, in this paper, is to criticize a thesis according to which Brentano's views on the mind should be considered along the lines of a higher-order theory of consciousness (T1). Fisette suggests that the 'changes that Brentano brings to his initial theory of consciousness [make it] clear that one may not reduce it to [a] higher-order theory of consciousness'. Furthermore, he points out that, significantly, Brentano never held the view that consciousness was relational (or 'transitive'): 'consciousness represents within Brentano's theory a form of intransitive self-consciousness which is intrinsic to the agent'.

According to Fisette, the interpretation of Brentano's theory of consciousness as a HOT-theory is not only widespread, it is also persistent: it simply 'prevails in Brentanian studies'. This statement is surprising, especially when we consider the authors and papers supposedly championing this interpretation: Güzeldere (1997) doesn't make any statements regarding the specific nature of Brentano's theory of mind (his name is mentioned along with James and Locke, in a list of philosophers who took consciousness to be some kind of perception of a mental state), while Siewert (1998) refuses to commit himself to interpreting Brentano's as a HOT-theory of consciousness. Zahavi (2004) simply underlines structural similarities between Brentano's account and HOT-theories. Textor (2006) does propose an interpretation using some higher-order structures, and both Gennaro (1996) and Janzen (2008) see in

Brentano's account a conception of consciousness as reflective or self-referential, but neither propose interpreting Brentano's theory as a HOT-theory proper. Rather, the common ground that unites these interpretations is simply the view that Brentano's account of consciousness involves a reflective or self-referential moment in every conscious state. This feature is certainly not incompatible with a HOT-friendly theory of consciousness (see for instance, Kriegel 2003), but having this feature doesn't make a theory of consciousness a HOT-theory, and the authors mentioned here can hardly be seen to champion (T1). Who, then, is speaking up for (T1)? According to Fissette, Rosenthal himself would defend (T1): 'Rosenthal (1991, 30, n. 4) nevertheless considers that the heart of the Brentanian theory of consciousness "is virtually indistinguishable from that for which [he] argue[s]"'. Unfortunately, Fissette misquotes his opponent: Rosenthal says quite the contrary: '[Brentano] gives no reason for his insistence that this awareness of conscious mental states is intrinsic to those states; and if it is not [intrinsic], the resulting theory is virtually indistinguishable from that for which I argue below' (ROSENTHAL 1991, p. 30, n. 14). Contrary to Fissette, it seems clear to me that Rosenthal fully realizes that the intrinsicity of consciousness to mental states is a fundamental feature of Brentano's theory of mind. Therefore, attributing (T1) to Rosenthal seems misguided.

What, then, is Fissette's real target? Perhaps the view attacked by Fissette would be better formulated in the following way:

(T2) Brentano's account of consciousness makes consciousness a relational (or transitive) feature of the mind.

Here, although for different reasons, at least some intentionalists and (self-) representationalists would be sympathetic to (T2).<sup>1</sup> Also, many papers and books published by Brentano himself during his lifetime seem to offer some evidence for (T2).<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, Fissette neither addresses the intentionalist and self-representationalist readings of Brentano directly, nor comments on Brentano's own texts supporting (T2), but relies on a posthumously published work, edited by Franziska Mayer-Hillebrand in 1954, under the title *Religion and Philosophy* (BRENTANO, 1954) a collection of heavily-edited manuscripts bristling with unmarked personal additions by the editor herself as well as by Alfred Kastil, who undertook preliminary work on this edition in the 1930s. In Fissette's view, the concept of a mental agent (*der psychisch Tätige*) developed in some parts of this book would confirm the non-relational nature of Brentano's account of self-consciousness. Concomitantly, it would 'first attempt to answer the question as to what constitutes the real substrate of the

<sup>1</sup> See for instance Crane (2007) or Kriegel (2013).

<sup>2</sup> See also Fréchette (2011) for further elements in this direction.

complex mental act [...] apprehended in inner perception'. Indeed, Fisette takes the concept of the mental agent (which he also calls 'consciousness de se'), as the bearer of intransitive self-consciousness, to be both Brentano's answer to potential intentionalist or representationalist criticisms and a complement to his theory of mind in the *Psychology*.

The details of this view run as follows: consciousness de se should be seen as a 'new mode of consciousness' thanks to which our intransitive conscious states are said to be conscious. Brentano's theory of consciousness would therefore have three levels: (1) transitive conscious mental states (seeing a blue patch); (2) intransitive conscious mental states (consciously seeing); and (3) consciousness de se (1<sup>st</sup>-person thought that I am in the process of seeing, which Fisette characterizes as intransitive). Following Fisette's interpretation, levels (1) and (2) were considered by the early Brentano to be parts of the mereological whole that constitutes the unity of consciousness. In Fisette's view, the early Brentano thought that the mereological relation of consciousness, with its parts (1) and (2), was all there was to say about consciousness. But according to Fisette, the late Brentano wasn't satisfied with this model, mainly because (a) 'the nature of the substrate that underlies and unifies as a whole the modes of consciousness' is left untouched by the earlier model; and (b) no details are given in the earlier account 'on the status of the simultaneous consciousness that accompanies the various elements that make up this unity'. Brentano therefore introduced level (3) to address these issues, thereby offering an account of consciousness which is not a full-blown higher-order theory (rather a multi-layer theory), nor a typical same-order theory, nor an intentionalist (or representationalist) model of self-consciousness (or self-representationalist model) although it includes many elements of each of these theories.

The proposal is original and provocative. Unfortunately, Fisette doesn't go into the details of his proposal, which remains speculative to a large extent: from an historical point of view, it falls short of textual evidence supporting the central thesis, according to which consciousness de se (as a substrate) *makes* our intransitive conscious mental states conscious. In fact, as I will suggest, Brentano never doubted that there is a substrate to our conscious mental states. This substrate is called the soul, but *pace* Fisette, in Brentano it never plays any role in the explanation of what makes mental states intransitively conscious. Concerning Fisette's points (a) and (b), I don't see how determining the nature of the substrate would offer an answer to the question of what makes our mental states conscious: the substrate being a brain, a transcendental ego, a person, etc. wouldn't change the fact that simultaneous mental states are co-conscious, i.e. that they belong together as parts of larger whole. The substrate could definitely help answer the question of what makes consciousness

identical over time,<sup>3</sup> but Fisette doesn't explore this possible motivation in Brentano's later account of consciousness.

## From the 'psychology without a soul' to the substantial bearer of consciousness

It seems relatively unproblematic to say that Brentano stuck to the thesis that the mental (or 'psychical') is, in some important sense, distinct from the physical. The realm of the mental is immaterial, while the realm of the physical is spatio-temporally extended, i.e. it is material. He also remained firm about the relation between the soul and the mental acts: the soul is a substance, whose accidents are the mental acts. We find this conception in the early Metaphysics lectures from the 1860s, in the *Psychology from an empirical Standpoint* from 1874, and in later manuscripts belonging to the so-called 'reistic' period. Not only did Brentano remain, all his life, true to his faith—he believed in the existence of God and in the immortality of the soul—he also consistently saw the demonstration of these two theses as a crucial part of his philosophical endeavor. This being said, Brentano never brings any assumption about the existence of the soul into play when he discusses the unity of consciousness or any other matter concerning psychology. The main reason for this is that he considers psychology to be a science of experience. Souls are not experienced. Phenomena are:

If someone says that psychology is the science of the soul, and means by 'soul' the substantial bearer of mental states, then he is expressing his conviction that mental events are to be considered properties of a substance. But what entitles us to assume that there are such substances? It has been said that such substances are not objects of experience; neither sense perception nor inner experience reveal substances to us. (BRENTANO, 1874/1973, p. 8).

In fact, Brentano wished to establish a scientific psychology liberated from metaphysical assumptions about the existence of the soul: 'whether or not there are souls, the fact is that there are mental phenomena'.

Fisette's supposition that this attitude developed into a problem for the late Brentano is not unfounded. Indeed, both Kastil and Kraus make similar observations. In 1924, Kraus goes so far as to put into question Brentano's statement in the *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* to the effect that 'there is no such thing as the soul, at least not as far as we are concerned, but psychology can and should exist nonetheless, although, to use Albert Lange's

<sup>3</sup> I discuss the question of the unity of consciousness over time in Brentano in Fréchette (2012).

paradoxical expression, it will be a psychology without a soul' (Brentano 1874/1973, 8). In his 1924 preface to the book, Kraus comments on this phrase:

That Brentano had no intention of writing a 'psychology without a soul' as is often said should not need to be pointed out. His discussion of the unity of consciousness is an extremely important preliminary to consideration of the problem of the soul. According to Brentano's later theory, words like 'consciousness', 'presentation' and 'judgment' are mere grammatical abstractions which have no independent meaning. However, 'someone with something before his mind' is an independently meaningful expression. In other words, it stands to reason that mental states must have a subject whose accidents they are; furthermore, in conceptualizing ourselves as mental agents, we perceive this subject directly, even if only extremely generally. So the problem of the soul is only a question of *what* is the subject of consciousness and not of *whether* such a thing must exist. (KRAUS 1924, in BRENTANO, 1874/1973, p. 361).

It is true that in 1874 (but also later), Brentano considered discussions on the unity of consciousness as preliminary to reflections on the immortality of the soul. The *Psychology* was originally supposed to include a sixth book that would deal with this topic (BRENTANO, 1874/1973, p. 55). But Brentano never said that the immortality, or even the existence of the soul, was a condition for the unity of consciousness. Following Kraus' view, the late Brentano would have said that the expression 'unity of consciousness' has no independent meaning since 'consciousness' doesn't designate a *realis*. As such, talk of the 'unity of consciousness' should be reduced down to 'unity of someone with something before his mind'. In other words, when one speaks of consciousness, one actually speaks of 'someone with something before his mind'. If this reduction is to be in any way meaningful, the term 'mind' must itself be the designation of a real entity. Following Kraus, this would mean that the unity of consciousness is nothing but the unity of the soul. The consequence of reism is that 'consciousness' designates nothing other than the soul.

Even if we accept this strong ontological consequence for the theory of consciousness, it is still unclear whether the soul, or self-consciousness *qua substrate*, fills a gap in the earlier theory, despite giving an ontological answer to a phenomenological problem. After all, instead of talking about 'consciousness', and preferring 'mental agent' or 'mental activity', the basis of Brentano's account remains, at bottom, unchanged in his later view, as shown by these remarks from 1911:

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

As I have already emphasized in my *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, however, for the secondary object of mental activity one does not have to think of any particular one of these references, as for example the reference to the primary object. It is easy to see that this would lead to an infinite regress, for there would have to be a third reference, which

would have the secondary reference as object, a fourth, which would have the additional third one as object, and so on. The secondary object is not a reference but a mental activity, or, more strictly speaking, the mentally active subject, in which the secondary reference is included along with the primary one. Although now no infinite regress of mental references *en parergo* can arise, it does not follow that mental activity is to be conceived as something simple. Even when mental references have the same object, they can still be different if the modes of reference are different. (BRENTANO, 1874/1973, p. 215).

For the late Brentano, the mentally active subject includes both the primary reference (my seeing red) and the secondary reference (my being conscious of seeing red). This statement doesn't really differ from the earlier thesis that every conscious act contains a primary and a secondary object. Whether the *bearer* is a self-conscious substance, a brain, or a mental act in its unity doesn't change anything with regard to the mereological relation between the parts. Also, having a substantial bearer of the secondary relation is certainly a change in the theory, but it remains unclear how this substantial bearer is supposed to give us anything substantial about the nature of the unity of consciousness, or at least anything not already provided in Brentano's earlier account.

## Why a substantial bearer of consciousness?

Even today, readers and students of Brentano seem unable to identify the deeper motives that led him, around 1904, to reism, namely that one can only present things, i.e. *n*-dimensionally extended substances (through their ontologically dependent accidents), since only such things exist. However, since Brentano believed in the existence and immortality of the soul (a 'zero-dimensional substance'), the reistic assumption can hardly be seen as a change of mind regarding his conception of consciousness and the soul. In other words, even if one accepts Fisette's claim that the introduction of the mental agent changes something in Brentano's general picture of consciousness, we still have to find a reason for this change, since presumably it is supposed to be an improvement on the earlier theory.

I see at least one important reason for this change. Following his reistic turn, Brentano rejected all entities that weren't *realia*. In his earlier view, intentionality was thought to be a relation to an immanent object: an *irrealis*. My imaginings of a unicorn and a horse both have respective intentional objects in the same sense, following this view. Rejecting *irrealia* forced Brentano to review his conception of intentionality as a relation between a subject and an intentional or immanent object. Thus, intentional relations in the earlier view were doomed to be mere *irrealia* after the reistic turn. This seems to me a plausible reason for the late Brentano to reject (T2) and to try to work out a strictly non-transitive account of consciousness. But if this is the

case, the concept of the mental agent as bearer of conscious acts cannot be seen as a complement to the earlier theory; it is a simple consequence of reism. Even if this is the case, it doesn't imply that the mental agent guarantees the unity of consciousness.

In other words, the introduction of the mental agent cannot be interpreted as a sign that Brentano's account of self-consciousness was necessarily intransitive, or that this is expressed in his reism. On the contrary, reism constitutes a break with his earlier account of *irrealia*. From then on, consciousness cannot possibly be explained in intentional terms in a reistic framework. The intransitive substantial self-consciousness advocated in reism is certainly not a natural complement to the earlier theory but is instead part of a very different theory. Brentano himself referred later to his earlier theory of intentionality as his 'old theory', which in his view was superseded by the newer one.

## The mess in Brentanian scholarship

These different phases in the evolution of Brentano's thought, together with the doctrinal conflicts that emerged among his students on the appropriate treatment of his posthumous writings, still today constitute a major obstacle to a clear and faithful treatment of Brentano's ideas. The materials used by Fisette for his reconstruction of Brentano's account of consciousness are no exception. The passage from *Religion und Philosophie* is part of an essay entitled 'Über die Geistigkeit und Unsterblichkeit der menschlichen Seele' (*On the Spirituality and Immortality of the Human Soul*). This essay was written by Kastil in 1942, and not by Brentano. Here Kastil tries to give an account of Brentano's 'numerous attempts at giving a proof of the spirituality of the psychical subject' (KASTIL, 1942; BRENTANO, 1954, p. 265). Some of these attempts are inspired by Brentano's lecture on the being of God (*Vom Dasein Gottes*) given in Vienna in 1891/92; other parts of the essay are taken from a lecture by Marty on body and soul. Supposedly even Stumpf's 'Leib und Seele' from 1896 (STUMPF, 1903) was influenced by these lectures.<sup>4</sup> Putting aside the fact that the manuscript in question was not written by Brentano, nothing in the text used by Fisette is actually referable to Brentano's 'late position', since it is composed of and/or inspired by numerous texts by Brentano (and Marty) belonging to different unidentified periods.

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Kraus (1924) is stating exactly the contrary when he says that it was Stumpf's lecture of 1896 (Stumpf (1903)) that paved the way for Brentano's alleged change of mind regarding the mental subject (BRENTANO 1874/1973, p. 316).



## Unity (and the bearer) of consciousness

Even if one takes the Kastil paper into consideration in Brentano (1954), it is not stated there that the mental agent is what makes the unity of consciousness possible. In fact, the point made here by Kastil is different to that put forward by Fisette. Here, Brentano and/or Kastil are saying that *since* there is something like the unity of consciousness (and with it the unity of both sensory and non sensory phenomena), a so-called 'semi-materialistic' position like Aristotle's—according to which the bearer of the consciousness has to be material to some extent—is not defensible. The nature of the bearer plays no central role in the point made here by Brentano and/or Kastil. Associating, like Aristotle, the sensory experience with a kind of sensitive-material consciousness, is, according to Brentano and/or Kastil, not defensible, since it would allow for different conscious entities—a semi-materialistic position that Brentano and/or Kastil would reject. Even if we set aside the problematic authorship of the text, the position advocated there does not state the necessity of a substantial bearer. Rather, it confirms the earlier account of the unity of consciousness, keeping the same basic assumption that the unity of consciousness—the unity of the mental phenomena—is a primitive fact warranted by inner perception—a primitive fact that is one of the central features in Brentano's distinction between the mental and the physical, and which excludes Aristotle's semi-materialism in favor of a dualist position. Brentano's point in the quote used by Fisette (on semi-materialism) is to 'prove the spiritual nature of the self' (*die Geistigkeit unseres Ich*) and 'definitively refute all materialism' (*dem Materialismus jeder Ausweg entziehen*) (BRENTANO, 1954, 228).

I want to argue that what is introduced in the quote is not a mental agent, but a spiritual self, which is over and above any kind of materialistic conception of subjectivity. The introduction of this 'spiritual self' is not meant to provide a 'deeper' ontological ground, one which would found the unity of consciousness, and nor does it give an account of the status of unifying self-consciousness. In fact, following the text, the unity of consciousness is already a fact secured by inner perception. One might call it the 'mental agent' or the 'basic unifying thing' (*letzteinheitliches Ding*); its ontological nature doesn't play any role in the phenomenological fact of the unity of consciousness:

[Aristotle] doubly infringes the secured fact of the unity of consciousness. First by conceiving the soul as a composition of corporeal and incorporeal parts. Second, by attributing to the different parts of our sensory perceptions and desires different parts of the corporeal subject. (BRENTANO, 1954, 224).

[I]n inner perception, [we are confronted] with one basic unifying thing which has a multiplicity of determinations. (BRENTANO 1954, 226).<sup>5</sup>

Later in the same text, the following conclusion is formulated:

We must think the subject of all our states of consciousness as a non-spatial substance which doesn't constitute a part of the flesh itself, as a spiritual, i.e. zero-dimensional being (*Wesen*). As such, [it is] localized nowhere in the brain, not even in space does it stand locally nearer to a point than to another. For that reason, it can have an immediate effect on every part of the brain and can receive an immediate effect from every part of the brain.<sup>6</sup>

In my view, the account sketched here is quite different from Fisette's reconstruction. Brentano's and/or Kastil's point seems rather to be that the unity of consciousness is what *makes* a being (a creature) conscious. The unity of consciousness is opposed to materialism in this view, since it is the unity of both sensory and non-sensory states that makes a being conscious. In this sense, I would suggest that Brentano shares with Rosenthal the assumption that state consciousness is a primitive fact, and that it explains creature consciousness. Fisette would disagree: following his reconstruction, Brentano should (or wanted to) give an account of state consciousness on the basis of intransitive creature consciousness. I can't see such a project in Brentano's writings. In my view, a Brentanian mental state is conscious because of its *mereological* and *self-referential* structure, and on the basis of this structure alone.

## Conclusion

Fisette starts the conclusion of his paper with the following remark: 'Once we consider the changes that Brentano brings to his initial theory of consciousness, it is clear that one may not reduce it to either versions of the higher-order theory of consciousness'.

What I want to show, against Fisette, is that this reconstruction is not attributable to Brentano. A definitive take on Brentano's theory as not being

<sup>5</sup> German original: '[Aristoteles] verstößt gegen die gesicherte Tatsache der Einheit des Bewußtseins, und zwar doppelt, erstens indem er die Seele als Zusammensetzung aus einem körperlichen und einem unkörperlichen Bestandteile faßt, zweitens indem er unsere sinnlichen Wahrnehmungen und Begehungen Teil um Teil verschiedenen Teilen des körperlichen Subjektes zuweist'; '[I]n der inneren Wahrnehmung [haben wir es] mit *einem* letzteinheitlichen Dinge zu tun, das eine Mannigfaltigkeit von Bestimmungen aufweist'. (p. 226).

<sup>6</sup> German original: 'Wir müssen uns also das Subjekt aller unserer Bewußtseinszustände als eine unräumliche Substanz denken, die nicht einen Teil des Leibes selbst bildet, als ein geistiges, d.h. null-dimensionales Wesen. Als solches an keiner Stelle des Gehirns lokalisiert, nicht selbst im Raume, steht es keinem Punkte desselben örtlich näher als einem anderen, und kann eben darum auf jeden Teil des Gehirns gleich unmittelbar einwirken und von jedem unmittelbar eine Einwirkung empfangen.' (BRENTANO, 1954, p. 231).

reducible to a higher-order theory of consciousness is certainly not attained here. There definitely are higher-order elements in Brentano's theory of consciousness, as there are elements of a self-representational theory. Even similarities with same-order theories are undeniable. Considering, on top of this, Brentano's complete rejection of materialism, a reconstruction of his theory of consciousness turns out to be a very complicated enterprise.

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