

Comments on Denis Fisette, “Franz Brentano and higher-order theories of consciousness”

ABSTRACT

For the last few years, research on Brentano’s psychology has turned to mereology for a theoretical framework which could help to address and solve some major problems, such as the question of the unity of the mind despite its being made up of lots of simultaneous and consecutive mental acts or the question of the unity of each of these mental acts despite of its being made up of several descriptive components. By using Gilbert Null’s formalization of Husserl’s mereology we take a closer look at some of Brentano’s claims as well as at their issues and consequences.

Keywords: Brentano; Philosophy of mind; Mereology; Husserl, High-order theories.

RESUMO

Nos últimos anos, a pesquisa sobre a psicologia de Brentano vem buscando na mereologia uma base teórica que pudesse ajudar a tratar e a resolver grandes problemas, tais como a questão da unidade da mente apesar de ser constituída por muito atos mentais simultâneos e consecutivos ou a questão da unidade de cada um destes atos mentais apesar de serem constituídos de muitos componentes descritivos. Usando a formalização da mereologia de Husserl feita por de Gilbert Null, podemos examinar mais detidamente algumas reivindicações de Brentano assim como seus problemas e consequências.

Palavras-chave: Brentano; Filosofia da mente; Mereologia; Husserl; Teorias de ordem superior.

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For the last few years, research on Brentano's psychology has turned to mereology for a theoretical framework, which could help to address and solve some major problems in the philosophy of mind¹. These notoriously include the question of the unity of the mind despite its being made up of lots of simultaneous and consecutive mental acts, and also the question of the unity of each of these mental acts despite of its being made up of several descriptive components. The idea of using mereology as an analytical tool for descriptive psychology was suggested by Brentano himself and even developed by some of his early disciples. In this sense, it is not so much a new idea as the rediscovery of an old one.

The problem, however, is that, besides the general idea of a formal theory of relations between wholes and their parts and apart from a few insights on how such relations could be conceived, there is no single and unified theoretical framework which can be counted as "mereology". Although there is a rather standard formal system for *extensionalist* mereology based on first sketches by Leśniewski and Whitehead and then developed by Leonard and Goodman², this system obviously cannot be the tool which descriptive psychology requires. This system, which is built to comply with strong nominalist requirements, only takes wholes as mere sums of their parts so that wholes do not really constitute new entities and parts do not depend on the wholes of which they are part. Therefore, if it is to overcome Hume's bundle theory of mind, descriptive psychology obviously needs some stronger notion of a whole and of its relations to its parts.

In his third *Logical Investigation*, Edmund Husserl notoriously made a first attempt to state in a semi-formal way some of the principles on which such a "stronger" mereology could be grounded. Husserl indeed distinguished between two kinds of parts, namely *pieces* (*Stücke*), which can exist separately from each other and from the whole they are part of, and *moments* (*Momente*), which ontologically depend on the whole of which they are part. He then went on to state some relations which hold between wholes and their pieces as well as between pieces of a same whole; between wholes and their moments as well as between moments of the same whole; between pieces and their own pieces; between pieces and their own moments; and so on. As it is based on wholes and parts, such a formal ontology is a mereology, but, as Peter Simons (1982, 1987) shows, it is very different from Leonard and Goodman's extensional mereology as it involves (several kinds of) dependence relations, which clearly are intensional. Both Kit Fine (1995, p. 463-485) and Gilbert Null (2007, p.33-69;

¹ Besides the authors mentioned in Denis Fisette's paper, I would also mention Arnaud Dewalque, "Brentano and the parts of the mental: a mereological approach to phenomenal intentionality" in Kriegel (2013).

² A.N. Whitehead (1916, p.423-454); Leśniewski (1916); H. Leonard and N. Goodman (1940, p.45-55); N. Goodman (1951).

2007, p.119-159) have made attempts to formalize Husserl's theory by interpreting but also completing and systematizing Husserl's insights.

Now, although I do not want to claim that formalization is the only way to guide clear and rigorous reasoning, I believe that it could be very useful to look more closely at Husserl's mereology and its systematization by Fine or by Null both in relation to (1) Brentano's own attempts to think about the mind in mereological terms, and (2) contemporary attempts to solve problems in philosophy of mind by using some of Brentano's notions and theses. By using Null's formal system, I have recently expressed some important differences – and disagreements – between several contemporary readings of Brentano's descriptive psychology as well as drawn some important conclusions from these differences (LECLERCQ, 2014). This work included:

- the debate between Higher-Order Theories of consciousness and several "unilevelist" theories of consciousness³;
- the debate between the standard conception of intentionality as a relation to some immanent object and Sauer or Antonelli's "continuist" conception of intentionality as both a relation to some transcendent object and a correlation between the act and its immanent content⁴;
- the debate between those who do and those who do not identify the phenomenal content of the act with its representational content⁵.

All these debates concern some part-whole as well as some dependence relations between components of the mind. And all of them thus lend themselves to some mereological analysis. The reason why Husserl's framework seems to be relevant here is that it seems to fit with Brentano's own mereological claims. In much-discussed pages of his *Descriptive psychology* Brentano does indeed distinguish between parts which are really separable (either *mutually* such as in an act of seeing and a simultaneous act of audition or *unilaterally* such as in an act of presentation grounded on an act of judgement) and parts which are only distinctional". Amongst the latter, Brentano distinguishes between those which are *mutually pervading* such as the affirmative quality of a judgment and its being directed to the object "truth", those that are *logically related* such as the acts of perceiving, of seeing and of seeing red, those which are *correlative* such as the act of seeing and what is seen, and those which are *inseparably concomitant* such as the (primary)

³ S. Shoemaker (1994, p.21-38); D.M. Rosenthal (1986; 1997; 2005); A.L.Thomasson (2000; 2006); U. Kriegel (2003; 2004a; 2004b, 2006; 2009; 2012; 2013).

⁴ R. Chisholm (1967); K. Mulligan and B. Smith (1982; 1985); A. Chrudzimski (2001; 2013); W. Sauer (2006); M. Antonelli (2009); G. Fréchette (2011; 2013).

⁵ G. Harman (1990) ; T. Crane (1992); Dretske (1995); M. Tye (1995); U. Kriegel (2003; 2011); B. Loar (2003); G. Graham, T. Horgan and J. Tienson (2007; 2009).

direction of the act upon an object and its (secondary) direction upon itself ⁶ (1995, p.15-27).

In these pages Brentano explicitly states that intentionality and consciousness are distinctional rather than real parts of the mind but also that they are inseparably concomitant. And this is what we have to give an account of in mereological terms. It is not enough to merely state that, contrary to the claims of the Higher Order Theory of consciousness, intentionality and consciousness are distinctional parts of one and the same act; we still need to know which kind of relation they hold to each other. Brentano claims that they are "inseparably concomitant" rather than "mutually pervading", "logically related" or "correlative". What does that mean?

An interesting feature of Null's formalization of Husserl's mereology is that it distinguishes two different notions of ontological dependence, one being stronger than the other. The basic one, which is called "(weak) founding", simply consists in conditional existence, i.e. in the fact that some object is inseparable from another one, i.e. it cannot exist without the other object also existing. And this relation systematically holds between moments or distinctional parts of the same whole. Unlike pieces, which can exist separately from the whole they are pieces of, moments are ontologically dependent on the wholes they are moments of (Definition 6). And, since Husserl's mereology also admits that wholes are ontologically dependent on their parts – i.e. wholes cannot exist and be what they are without being composed by the parts they are made of (Axiom 4) – it can easily be shown by founding transitivity (Axiom 5) that, unlike pieces of the same whole, moments of the same whole depend on each other, i.e. they require each other in order to exist and be what they are.

But there is also a second and stronger notion of ontological dependence, namely "relative dependence", which allows that, among two interdependent parts of a whole, one be "more fundamental" than the other. Let's first take an example which exceeds the bare field of descriptive psychology and instead concerns the psycho-physical relation: a theory of the relations between mind and body could try (1) to distinguish between a mental state and the neurological state which instantiates it; (2) to state that this mental state ontologically depends on this neurological state; (3) to state that, conversely, the existence of this neurological state necessarily implies the existence of this mental state (so that, in this broad sense of "inseparability", ontological dependence goes on both sides) but still (4) to claim that the physical state is ontologically prior to the mental state and grounds it. According to Null, who claims to follow Husserl on this point, this would require that the grounded component be dependent on some discrete part of the grounding component,

⁶ See also K. Mulligan and B. Smith (1985, p.627-644); W. Baumgartner (2013); U. Kriegel (forthcoming).

i.e. on a part of the grounding component which does not overlap the grounded component (Definition 3).

Now, whether we consider that this is a good way to deal with psychophysical relations or not, it could perhaps help us to think about the relations between intentionality and consciousness. Even if these two were moments of one and the same act – rather than two separate acts as Higher Order Theories suppose – it could still be possible that one of these moments be "relatively dependent" on the other one. And, in principle, this dependency could work in either direction. On the one hand, intentionality could be more fundamental and consciousness could (always) "come on top of it". Consciousness would somehow supervene on the intentional act. Or, on the other hand, consciousness could be more fundamental, something like the very basis of the mind, and intentionality would (always) come on top of it. Consciousness in general would be the essential feature of the mind, which intentionality, i.e. "consciousness of...", could specify by directing it towards some specific object in some specific way.

By stating that intentionality and consciousness are "inseparably concomitant", Brentano seems to claim that neither of them is less fundamental than – and "comes on the top" of – the other. Some parts of Brentano's investigations, however, could support other readings.

The whole discussion about whether there are unconscious intentional acts seems to show that consciousness presupposes the intentional act which it makes aware of. And of course this is what led to the Higher-Order Theory of consciousness. But even without taking intentionality and consciousness to be separate mental acts as HOT does, it could be possible to consider that the first of these inseparable components of a single mental act is more fundamental than the second one. Despite being inseparable from intentionality, consciousness would be "incidental" (*nebenbei*) and "additional" (*als Zugabe*) to it.

In contradiction to all this, some pages of Brentano's *Theory of categories* seem to suggest that intentionality comes on top of consciousness. Brentano indeed talks about the mind as a substance and about the thinker or the auditor (i.e. some specific intentional instantiations of the mind) as its accidents. And he explicitly uses mereological terms to give an account of this: since the mind can "survive" the disappearance of the thought or the audition while the thinker or the auditor cannot exist without the mind, mind is said to be part of the thinker and of the auditor, which unilaterally depend on it. The problem, however, is that while Brentano claims that the thinker as a whole is something more than the mind, he also claims that there is no other part which completes the mind to make it a thinker; the accident of the mind which makes it a thinker is nothing, i.e. it is no real thing which could itself be considered as a separate object (1981, p. 115-116). This, as Barry Smith has underlined, makes that part of Brentano's mereology problematic as it violates

the weak supplementation principle in such a way that we can barely see such a theory as being still a mereology, i.e. as considering wholes being made of parts (1994, p.70-73)⁷. Brentano says that mind is not so much "completed" as "modified" by thought to make it a thinker; that thought is less a part of the whole than one of its "modalities".

This either forces us to give up regarding Brentano's theory of substance and accident as a genuine mereology or to reinterpret it as merely saying that the accident is not a *piece* – i.e. an independent part – yet a part of the whole; it is just a *moment*, a distinctional part of the whole. According to Smith, the reason why Brentano did not put things that way is that he started from Aristotle's standpoint which would not even consider that the bare mind and the thinker could both exist at the same time; when one actually exists the other only has potential existence, so that they cannot sustain part-whole relations (SMITH, 1994, p.78-79). If however we consider that the bare mind as a substance is part of the thinker as a whole – as Brentano seems to do – we could consider that the thought as the accident of the mind is another part of the whole, though only a distinctional and not a real part of it. The intentional thought would then not only be dependent on the thinker as a whole but also be less fundamental than and "relatively dependent" on the mind; it would come on top of it.

Such an asymmetry would notably lie in the fact that, even though mind is bound to be intentionally oriented towards some object and is therefore generically dependent on some intentional act – consciousness is bound to be consciousness of something – it is not ontologically dependent on this particular intentional act rather than another, while this particular intentional act seems to be ontologically dependent on this mind rather than generically dependent on some mind. This is how I take Denis Fisette's claim that intentionality not only involves consciousness but *de se* consciousness, i.e. consciousness of being the mental act of some particular mind. In other words, intentional acts are "accidents" of – and ontologically dependent on – particular minds; there is no general thought of the Eiffel Tower which would generically depend on some mind but not ontologically depend on any particular mind; my thought of the Eiffel Tower is not the same thought as Denis Fisette's thought of the Eiffel Tower because it involves some implicit reference to my mind as its bearer.

Now, how can we reconcile this idea that consciousness, taken as some personal mental agency, comes first and is then specified or modalised by particular intentional acts with the idea that consciousness yet presupposes the intentional act which it makes aware of? Does being conscious of thinking of the Eiffel Tower not somehow "come on top of" thinking of the Eiffel Tower? Being conscious in general necessarily implies some thinking but does not

⁷ See also Chisholm (1982, p.3-16).

depend on any particular thought. Yet being conscious of thinking of the Eiffel Tower depends on a particular thought (and this is what made HOT plausible).

In order to give an account of the relations between consciousness and intentionality which goes beyond the mere claim that they are distinct parts of the same act— which I think is what Denis Fisette tries to do in this paper — we probably need to distinguish between consciousness in general, which is generically dependent on some intentional act though not ontologically dependent on any particular one, and consciousness of some particular intentional act, which is ontologically dependent on this particular act. While, according to Brentano, any particular intentional act is "inseparably concomitant" of the consciousness of it (which is a symmetrical relation), it seems to be "relatively dependent" on consciousness in general (which is an asymmetrical relation). And of course, consciousness of a particular act is "logically related" to consciousness in general: being conscious that one sees red is an instantiation of being conscious.

Even though they surely are much more complex than extensional part-whole relations, all these relations between distinct parts of a mental act seem to be within reach of a richer mereology such as Husserl's system (as it is formalized by Null) which uses two notions of ontological dependence.

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