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WHAT IS PRE-REFLECTIVE SELF-AWARENESS?  
BRENTANO'S THEORY OF INNER CONSCIOUSNESS REVISITED

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I reconsider Brentano's notion of inner consciousness both from a historical and a systematic point of view. Although the basic outlines of his theory are well known, an important feature that Brentano made explicit only in later writings has largely gone unnoticed. Brentano allows inner consciousness to vary on a scale from indistinct to distinct forms of awareness. In the first part of this paper I explain how Brentano embeds this idea into his conception of the intentional structure of experience. In the second part I employ this idea in defending a neo-Brentanist theory of pre-reflective self-awareness against various objections that have been raised in the recent literature.

KEYWORDS: pre-reflective self-awareness, self-representational theories of consciousness, intentional structure of experience, introspection, inner perception, inner observation

INTRODUCTION

A common distinction drawn in philosophical theories of self-awareness is the distinction between reflective and pre-reflective ways of being aware of oneself. The distinction goes by many names. Pre-reflective self-awareness is also called 'non-objectual', 'non-objectifying', 'non-observational', 'non-thematic', 'non-conceptual', 'intrinsic', 'implicit', 'tacit', 'low-level' or simply 'basic' self-awareness. The terminology varies with the philosophical traditions in which this idea has been nurtured. In one form it originated in German Idealism and in German Romantic philosophy where it plays a central role in the works of Fichte, Hölderlin, Novalis and Schelling.<sup>1</sup> Another version of it emerged – or re-emerged – in the writings of Husserl, Scheler, Sartre and the ensuing phenomenological

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<sup>1</sup> This tradition has been reconstructed and given a modern shape in the work of Dieter Henrich (1966) and Manfred Frank (1991).

tradition.<sup>2</sup> Finally and most recently, philosophers taking a naturalistic approach employ a similar distinction when they refer to simple forms of self-awareness in pre-verbal children and in nonhuman animals.<sup>3</sup>

It is not just the terminology that varies however. Given the huge differences in doctrine between these traditions it is unlikely that they converge in that particular case on a single idea. We should rather expect to find as many different conceptions of pre-reflective self-awareness as there have been reasons for drawing such a distinction. Yet another source to which one can turn here is the work of the 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and psychologist Franz Brentano. His attempt to provide a systematic foundation for the idea of pre-reflective self-awareness will be reconsidered in what follows.

That Brentano should play a seminal role in this context may need no further explanation. It is well known that Brentano had a formative influence on phenomenology, providing it with the theoretical background from which Husserl and his successors took off. This makes Brentano's view important from a historical point of view. In addition to that, however, I will argue that there are also systematic reasons for revisiting his writings on this matter.<sup>4</sup> In my view, Brentano had a conception of pre-reflective self-awareness that was both more sophisticated and less mysterious than many of the accounts one can find elsewhere. This includes the recent self-representational theories of consciousness that have been developed in a neo-Brentanian spirit.<sup>5</sup> Despite this renewed interest in Brentano, I think that the main virtue of his theory of inner consciousness has been overlooked. Brentano conceived of self-awareness as a phenomenon that initially provides very little insight into the mind and only gradually turns into an epistemically clear form of self-awareness. This makes his theory not just interesting from a phenomenological point of view but also from a naturalistic perspective, or so I shall argue.

The plan of the paper is as follows. I begin with Brentano's definition of mental phenomena (section 1) and his idea that mental phenomena have a distinctive internal structure (section 2). I then consider what inner consciousness contributes to this structure

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<sup>2</sup> The phenomenological approach to pre-reflective self-awareness is elaborated and defended in the work of D. Zahavi (1999, 2005) and S. Gallagher (Gallagher & Zahavi 2008).

<sup>3</sup> A naturalistic bottom-up approach to self-awareness is taken, for instance, by Jose Bermúdez (1998) and Gottfried Vosgerau (2009).

<sup>4</sup> I am following here other recent interpreters that have pointed out the systematic significance of Brentano's view. See Thomasson (2000); Smith (1986, 2004); Soldati (2005), Janzen (2006) and Textor (2006).

<sup>5</sup> A collection of papers that attempt to revive Brentano's ideas within the contemporary framework of a representational theory of consciousness has been published by U. Kriegel and K. Williford (2006). The intricacies of this approach are clearly set forth and developed further by Kidd (forthcoming).

by clarifying two distinctions with which Brentano operates here: the distinction between primary and secondary objects (section 3), and his distinction between inner perception and inner observation (section 4). The main step in my interpretation will then consist in pointing out that inner perception and inner observation need not be conceived as two distinct cognitive faculties. Rather we can think of them as one faculty that gives rise to gradually different forms of self-knowledge (section 5). In the remaining part of the paper I will then exploit this interpretation for rebutting two objections that have been raised against Brentano's theory. David Rosenthal has argued that Brentano's model rests on a Cartesian premise and should therefore be replaced by a proper higher-order theory of consciousness (section 6). Others, including Henrich, Frank and many phenomenologists have questioned Brentano's treatment of the regress-problem and on that basis suggested that Brentano's model of consciousness should be replaced by a strictly one-level theory (section 7). I will argue that both objections miss their target because Brentano's fits neither the mould of a higher-order nor of a one-level theory.

## 1. INTENTIONALITY: CLEARING THE GROUND

Brentano is famous for a doctrine that was not his own invention. I am referring of course to his doctrine of the intentional nature of mental phenomena, as it is stated in the often quoted passage of his *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (1874/1995). This is not to suggest that Brentano was hiding his sources, as he explicitly mentions them: "the Scholastics of the Middle Ages", he says, already held the view that "every mental phenomenon is characterized by what [they] called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object" (ibid., p. 88). Brentano picks up this idea and makes it the foundation of his characterization of the mind. By following this Scholastic lead, he thinks that psychology can remain neutral on the question concerning which entities are capable of instantiating mental phenomena. Psychology, he suggests, can be defined as "the science of mental phenomena", without mentioning a bodily or mental substance that instantiates such phenomena.

Brentano thereby closes – at least for the moment<sup>6</sup> – the door to a theory of the self. The objects of investigation in his *Psychology* are the mental acts of perceiving, thinking, and feeling, not a self that perceives, thinks and feels. Yet one should not conclude thereby

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<sup>6</sup> Brentano intended to re-open this door in a later volume of his *Psychology* dedicated to the metaphysics of the mind (see Brentano 1874/1995, p. xv). He never finished this project, however, and I will not engage with this aspect of his philosophy here.

that Brentano also closes the door to a theory of self-awareness. He spends two entire chapters (chapters II and III of the second book) on setting forth an account of ‘inner consciousness’. Although Brentano refrains from using the term ‘self-awareness’ (i.e. ‘Selbstbewusstsein’), these chapters contain what we now call a theory of ‘pre-reflective’ self-awareness.<sup>7</sup> This will become clearer as we go along. First, however, some clarifications of Brentano’s doctrine of intentionality are in order.

When one interprets Brentano’s intentionality thesis literally, it says that mental phenomena contain intentional objects. These are not ordinary objects that may or may not exist in a spatio-temporal world, but mental images, ideas or concepts that we know to exist in the mind-dependent realm of our consciousness. Many interpreters have claimed however that Brentano’s doctrine involves no commitment to such intra-mental objects. Since I find these interpretations contrived, I prefer to take Brentano literally and accept that his notion of intentionality includes the category of immanent objects.<sup>8</sup>

Yet in opting for an immanentist interpretation, I am not proposing that Brentano is a *full-scale* immanentist who denies our minds the power to direct its attention to mind-independent objects. That, too, would be a serious distortion of his view. Brentano was convinced he could block this counter-intuitive consequence by understanding the images and concepts that exist “in” our minds as making up the *content* of our mental acts, without also being their *targets*. That means to acknowledge that Brentano always drew a clear distinction between mental acts, their immanent content, and whatever objects they are directed at.<sup>9</sup> It has been suspected that Brentano missed this crucial distinction because he often uses the terms ‘content’ and ‘object’ interchangeably. Brentano’s specific interests may explain this unfortunate aspect of his terminology, however. He defended what we now call an ‘internalist’ view of knowledge. From this perspective, one can be certain that mental acts and the ideas and concepts contained in them exist, but one cannot be certain that any objects exist in the external world or that they have the properties attributed to them in experience. This concern for what is certain or immediately evident may be reflected in his tendency to switch from ‘object’-talk to ‘content’-talk. But Brentano does

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<sup>7</sup> Brentano still uses the term ‘self-awareness’ in his *Psychology*, but only when quoting or referring to other writers he is discussing, e.g. Maudsley (p. 25, 27, 43), Horwicz (p. 36), Comte (p.40), Bain (p.59), Hamilton (p. 90), Lange (p. 133). Page references are to the 1874/1995 translation.

<sup>8</sup> I have argued for such a literal interpretation in Brandl (2006).

<sup>9</sup> The textual evidence supporting this claim is reviewed in Rollinger (2008).

not lose sight of this distinction when he is concerned with judgements that can be made only with a certain probability because they go beyond the content of our experience.<sup>10</sup>

Another feature of Brentano's doctrine of intentionality that has caused some confusion is his restricted use of the term 'mental'. Brentano applies this term only to conscious phenomena, i.e., to the realm of experience. No room is left in his theory for intentional states that are not experienced by the subject. But what about mental states that influence our behavior although we are not aware of this influence or even of their existence? Why does Brentano rule out that such states exist and that they can satisfy the criterion of intentionality?

There is a simple historical explanation why Brentano had no eye for the unconscious. His *Psychology* belongs to the era before Freud and therefore still in the grip of the Cartesian conception of the mind according to which the mind is by definition aware of all its states. Brentano's view would thus be fundamentally opposed to the functionalist conception of the mind that has recently replaced the Cartesian conception. Fortunately, we can move beyond this historical perspective and adopt a more charitable interpretation of Brentano on this point. Again, it is the internalist perspective that does the trick. This perspective is *not* incompatible with the functionalist view, which allows that intentional states may be conscious or unconscious. Adopting this perspective just means to give priority to states that are part of consciousness. This decision to give priority to conscious states can be justified by the fact experiences are commonly understood as the paradigmatic examples of mental states. If one takes this line, there is no need to deny the reality of unconscious states that are both 'mental' and 'intentional'. Admittedly, this was not the line taken by Brentano, but it is a charitable way of "updating" his theory without doing damage to it.

Having cleared the ground so far, I now turn to Brentano's theory of inner consciousness. This theory is very complex and so I will present it in several stages.

## 2. THE INNER STRUCTURE OF CONSCIOUS EXPERIENCE

Intentionality is a characteristic feature of mental phenomena according to Brentano, but it is not the only one. Brentano discusses at length also a number of other features. Mental phenomena, Brentano claims, are also characterized by the fact that they are all based on a limited number of simple presentations, what Hume called 'impressions'. Another feature

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<sup>10</sup> A simpler reason for this switch in terminology may be that everything is an object since the term 'object' denotes the most general category in ontology. So why not call the immanent content of a mental act an object too?

is that all mental phenomena appear to us “as a unity”, i.e. as part of *one* consciousness (ibid.). And last but not least, they are all “perceived in inner consciousness” (Brentano 1875/1995, p. 91).

This is not a random list for Brentano. In his view, all these features have a common source.<sup>11</sup> Although Brentano does not put it this way, I think one can identify this common source as the *internal structure* of our experience. Intentionality is the most prominent feature of experience because it is so immediately connected with this internal structure. The other features require further analysis and may therefore be considered to be aspects of this structure that can be derived from its intentional foundation.

Since the term ‘structure’ does not belong to Brentano’s own vocabulary, we need to make sure that our use of this term fits his theory. What could structure mean for Brentano? It must be something different from complexity, at least if we think of complex mental states as states that involve other states. Brentano insists that even the most elementary experience is “structured” by having distinctive parts. The example he often uses to illustrate this is the example of hearing a sound. Despite being the simplest experience one can think of, Brentano claims that it contains the following three discernable elements:

- a sound (= S),
- the hearing of a sound (= H),
- the inner awareness of hearing a sound (= A).

This tripartite analysis of experience is the backbone of Brentano’s theory of inner awareness. The analysis itself, it must be admitted, is not very illuminating. One cannot use it to *explain* what inner awareness means since it would be circular to appeal here to a structure whose description makes use of this very term. The theory envisaged here will become informative only if some independent explanation is given what it means for an experience to be structured in this way.

I will consider in the next three sections what Brentano has to offer to meet this challenge. Before I turn to that, however, let me mention an important point about Brentano’s view of perception. As the above example shows, Brentano’s analysis of perception contains an element that qualifies as a sense datum. It is the first element in the

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<sup>11</sup> This may not be true for another feature that Brentano mentions, namely that we perceive mental phenomena as ‘unextended’. One might take this to be a reason to omit this feature from Brentano’s list.

tripartite structure, which Brentano also calls a “physical phenomenon“, the sound S in the present case. Yet, Brentano’s theory is not a sense-datum theory that reduces perception to a relation between a subject and a sense datum. The very point of his analysis seems to be that more is involved in a simple experience than just being related to a sense datum. In order to hear the sound of the doorbell, for instance, one must not only be aware of the physical phenomenon, but also of the perceptual process which makes one aware of the sound. If one reduces experience to the presence of a sense datum, what is left is no experience at all. Hearing a sound would then be nothing more than receiving auditory information, like a blindsight patient receives visual information without seeing anything in the proper sense of the term.

By generalizing this point about perception, we arrive at a doctrine that Tomis Kapitan has called ‘the ubiquity of self-awareness’ (see Kapitan 1999). In Brentano’s terminology this doctrine says that there is no conscious experience, which does not include within its structure the element of inner awareness. Thus we can see how the idea that all mental phenomena have a complex inner structure prepares the ground for a theory of pre-reflective self-awareness.

### 3. PRIMARY AND SECONDARY OBJECTS

In Book II of his *Psychology*, Brentano opens the discussion of inner consciousness by drawing attention to the inhomogeneous use of the term ‘consciousness’. He first sets aside the moral meaning of the term when speaking about feelings of guilt or conscience.

Brentano’s concern is with the epistemic usage. Taken in this sense, he says, ‘consciousness’ refers to the immediate knowledge that subjects have of their own mental phenomena. This specific type of consciousness Brentano singles out by the term ‘inner consciousness’, which he often uses interchangeably with ‘inner perception’.

At this point one might expect Brentano to give an account of first-person knowledge as it pertains to our own mental states. But he treats these epistemological issues only in passing. Although he frequently refers to the self-evidence of inner consciousness, he does not say much about the source or the nature of this evidence.<sup>12</sup> This lack of epistemological concern will play an important role later when I defend Brentano against the objection that his account of inner consciousness is simply an outgrowth of his Cartesian thinking.

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<sup>12</sup> Brentano addresses this question in his writings on truth and evidence. See Brentano (1930/1966)

This said, I will set aside here the epistemological allusions that accompany Brentano's text. I take him to make a plain grammatical observation about how we use the term 'conscious' when he says: "There are undoubtedly occasions, when we are conscious of a mental phenomenon while it is present in us; for example while we have the presentation of a sound, we are conscious of having it" (Brentano 1874/1995, 126). Reflecting on such an experience, we may ask ourselves: "Do we have several heterogeneous presentations or only a single one?" The natural response here is certainly to count two acts of presentation with two different objects: the sound (S) and the hearing of the sound (H). Brentano dismisses this answer, pointing out its phenomenological consequences: if these presentations were different, the sound would be presented twice over in a single experience. "Yet this is not the case", Brentano says, "rather, inner experience seems to prove undeniably that [these two alleged presentations are connected] in such a peculiarly intimate way that its very existence constitutes an intrinsic prerequisite for the existence of [the presentation of the sound]" (ibid., 127).

Although the argument has a strong Cartesian flavor, Brentano is picking up here an idea that goes back to Aristotle's treatise *De anima*, a work he had examined in detail in his second academic thesis (Brentano 1867/1877). His point is that the question "How many presentations are involved when we are conscious of hearing a sound?" requires the same treatment as Aristotle's question: "How many senses are involved in a perceptual experience?" Since only a single sense is needed, Aristotle concluded that the sense of sight is also the sense by which we are experientially aware *that we see*. (*De anima*, 425b13f.). Brentano then simply draws the further conclusion that only a single presentation occurs if only a single sense is involved. We must therefore assume that a single act of perception can be directed simultaneously at two different objects in the tripartite structure of a single experience.

But how is this possible? Here Brentano draws on another Aristotelian idea. While we are hearing a sound (S), he says, we also perceive the hearing of the sound (H) "incidentally" (*en parergo*). The sound may therefore be called the *primary* object of the experience, while the experience itself apprehends itself "alongside" as a *secondary* object. This is how the experience of hearing a sound now splits up into *three* distinctive elements, with the inner awareness of hearing a sound (A) accompanying the sound and the hearing of the sound. In the following passage Brentano drives this point home:



“In the same mental phenomenon in which the sound is present to our minds we simultaneously apprehend the mental phenomenon itself. What is more, we apprehend it in accordance with its dual nature insofar as it has the sound as content within it, and in so far as it has itself as content at the same time. We can say that the sound is the *primary object* of the *act* of hearing and the act of hearing is the *secondary object*.”  
(Brentano 1874/1995, p.127f.)

Many commentators have puzzled about this enigmatic loop in Brentano’s theory. How can a presentation be its own intentional object? It does not become much clearer when we are told that a presentation can take itself as a secondary object. This just underlines the mystery involved. Lifting this mystery has remained a challenge for all neo-Brentanist theories, including the recent wave of self-representational theories mentioned earlier. For Brentano, the hard problem here is to understand this inner awareness in terms of his notion of ‘intentional inexistence’. It is already difficult to understand that this is not just a simple relation between an act and its immanent object, since we have to take into account the distinction between the content and the object of an experience. Now we also have to make sense of the claim that this ‘inexistence’ can be *reflexive*. But what does it mean to say that a mental act can intentionally inexist in itself?

There can be no doubt that Brentano was very much aware of this problem and he certainly did not want his theory to remain in this regard mysterious. There is one more distinction that Brentano could appeal to at this fundamental point: the distinction between inner perception and inner observation.

#### 4. INNER PERCEPTION AND INNER OBSERVATION

As I already mentioned, Brentano uses the term ‘inner consciousness’ interchangeably with ‘inner perception’. Each concept may shed light on the other, and Brentano exploits this fact in both ways. Sometimes he treats inner consciousness as the basic notion, when he explains inner perception as a “perception in inner consciousness” (Brentano 1974/1995, p. 91). Typically, however, his explanations proceed in the opposite direction, as for instance in the following remark: “Just as we call the perception of a mental activity which is actually present in us ‘inner perception’, we here call the consciousness which is directed upon it ‘inner consciousness’ (ibid., p. 101). Brentano appeals here to a basic

notion of ‘inner perception’ that is characterized independently by its epistemic features: “its immediate, infallible self-evidence” (ibid., p. 91).

Either way, Brentano seems deeply committed here to the Cartesian presumption that introspection is the ultimate source of our knowledge. But his commitment is weakened by the fact that he at the same time emphasizes the limits of introspection. Brentano notes that psychologists typically mean by this act a deliberate attempt to study one’s own mind from a first-person perspective. This is the type of introspection that has been justly criticized as an unreliable (or even impossible) method of psychological research. Brentano forestalls such criticism by pointing out that he uses the term ‘inner perception’ [‘innere Wahrnehmung’] in a stricter sense. It refers to a structural element of every conscious experience, *not* to an additional mental act directed at such an experience. Therefore Brentano introduces a second term – ‘innere Beobachtung’ (inner observation) – for this additional, second level awareness. And he points out that introspection taken in *this* sense is not a very trustworthy source of knowledge since it is susceptible to failures of memory (Brentano 1874/1973, p. 29).<sup>13</sup>

So far this distinction just seems to be a strategic move in defending the Cartesian ideal of immediate self-evidence. Brentano rescues this idea by restricting it to cases of inner perception. Introspection in this narrow or ‘proper’ sense then remains a form of infallible access to presently experienced mental states, and in providing such knowledge it also remains “the primary and essential source of psychology” (ibid.).

There is a problem with this interpretation, however. It can be sustained only if Brentano is talking here about two distinct faculties: fallible inner observation and infallible inner perception. This is the assumption that I now want to question in order to motivate a different interpretation of the distinction between inner perception and inner observation. The contentious claim of my alternative interpretation will be that there is only a *single* faculty involved here. This is contentious because Brentano seems to distinguish explicitly between two faculties when he says in the *Psychology* that “one of the characteristics of inner perception is that it can never become inner observation” (Brentano 1874/1995, p.91). It may be, however, that Brentano is just saying here that the specific characteristics of inner perception depend on the specific conditions given in

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<sup>13</sup> Following the English translation of the *Psychology*, Brentano scholars often use the term ‘introspection’ to signify only what Brentano calls ‘inner observation’, thus drawing a terminological line between ‘inner perception’ and ‘introspection’. This seems to me an unnecessary move that would deprive us of a common term for both inner perception and inner observation. The term ‘introspection’ naturally includes both, and so I will use it in this wider sense here.

experience itself, not on a distinct mental faculty. I will argue that this interpretation of the distinction between inner perception and inner observation provides a better fit for Brentano's actual view.

Let us take a closer look at the two criteria that Brentano employs in drawing this distinction.

1. The first criterion is attention. While observing an object requires that one pays "full attention" to the object, Brentano claims that inner perception makes it "absolutely impossible" that one turns one's attention to the mental state that one perceives. His example here is a feeling of anger that one can inwardly perceive, but that decreases or even vanishes as soon as one pays attention to it (Brentano 1874/1995, p. 29f).

2. The second criterion is time. Brentano relies here on cases of ordinary perception that require that an object must be currently present to be perceived. Similarly, one can perceive a mental act only by inner perception as long as this very act is present to the mind. As Brentano puts it: the inwardly perceived act must be simultaneous with the act of perceiving it. This restriction does not hold for observation because we can observe how objects change over time. We do this by recalling from memory previous experiences and compare them with our present ones (cf. Brentano 1874/1995, pp. 34ff.).

Do these criteria support the view that inner perception and inner observation are distinct mental capacities? I do not think so. The fact that inner perception requires no attention does not warrant this conclusion. We commonly perceive objects without paying attention to them, for instance, when we hear the humming of the refrigerator but notice it only when the humming suddenly stops. No one would suggest, however, that in such cases of subliminal perception we make use of a different faculty. These are ordinary perceptions that go unnoticed. There is a single faculty at work here in conditions that may or may not draw our attention to what we perceive.

Something similar can be said about the criterion of time. There may be an intuitive contrast between acts of perception that are instantaneous, and observations that take time and must therefore rely on memory. But memory also plays a role in instantaneous acts of perception by providing schemata for recognizing what we perceive. Without the help of memory I could not see a tree as a tree. Observing a tree requires in addition that I also keep track of the way in which the tree changes while I am observing it. This will require some monitoring of my perceptual experiences as they change with the object that I am observing. The condition that one keeps focused on the same object makes

observation a much more complex process. But it is still a form of perceiving objects and not a completely different faculty that we exercise in observing things.

The two criteria that Brentano uses for distinguishing inner observation from inner perception therefore suggest that in this case too only one faculty may be involved. If inner perception occurs under conditions that make it extremely easy to access one's own mental states, this may explain its relative simplicity as well as its apparent self-evidence. By contrast, the relative complexity and unreliability of inner observations may be explained by the fact that these observations take place under conditions that make us susceptible to errors of self-interpretation. In this way the two criteria can be helpful for distinguishing "easy" from "difficult" cases of introspection without postulating two distinct cognitive faculties.

If this interpretation is on the right track, then some widespread assumptions about Brentano's conception of inner consciousness will have to be revised. In particular, it will be difficult to find in Brentano justification for the claim that pre-reflective self-awareness is a phenomenon *sui generis* that can be sharply distinguished from reflective self-awareness. But is this just speculation or is there also textual evidence for this? In the next section I will discuss the few passages that suggested to me this alternative interpretation.

## 5. INDISTINCT AWARENESS OF ONESELF

At first glance, it may seem unlikely that Brentano considered the distinction between inner perception and inner observation as a merely gradual difference in how well we perceive our own mental states. If there is nothing more to it, why would Brentano put so much emphasis on this distinction in his *Psychology*, and how could he make it a fundamental pillar in his epistemology? But there are other cases where Brentano also changed his mind about the nature of a classification he considered to be fundamental. A notable example is his classification of mental phenomena, which takes presentations and judgments to be two fundamentally different kinds of mental acts. While this remained Brentano's official view, he also considered the possibility that there is no sharp line in nature that distinguishes presentations and judgments (see Brentano 1903/1987). There may be a continuum of intermediary cases that connects these two categories. It is therefore not unreasonable to suppose that inner consciousness may be another phenomenon that forms a continuum according to Brentano.

One also must not forget that Brentano's *Psychology* was an unfinished project, which he constantly revised and expanded.<sup>14</sup> In the second edition, published in 1911, Brentano included a selection of essays with "supplementary remarks". In one of these essays – entitled "On Mental Reference to Something as a Secondary Object" – he returns to the topic of inner consciousness. He first recapitulates his central claim that the intentional reference to an object can take different forms, giving again credit to Aristotle's observation that one can apprehend objects either in a primary or in secondary manner (Brentano 1911/1995, pp. 275f.). Then he adds the following remark:

"Not everything which is apprehended is apprehended explicitly and distinctly. Many things are apprehended only implicitly and confusedly [...] Sensible space is alternatively full and empty in one place and in another, but the individual full and empty places are not clearly differentiated. If this is true of physical phenomena, something analogous is true of the mental activity which refers to it. Thus we have in this case, and in many others elsewhere, mental activities which are not explicitly perceived in all of their parts. Inner perception, is rather, confused." (Brentano 1911/1995, p. 277)

This strikes me as a profound idea that Brentano adds to his previous account of inner consciousness. While it does not contradict anything he said before, it opens a new perspective. Brentano is now suggesting that underlying the distinction between primary and secondary objects, and hence also between inner perception and inner observation, we find a continuum of experiences that are basically of the same kind. This seems to me the natural way to understand his comparison with sensory perception. The sensory field contains more parts than we are able to differentiate. Which parts we perceive depends on our discriminatory abilities. If discrimination is weak, much of the sensory field will be perceived only implicitly or indistinctly. When discrimination improves, more aspects of this field become visible to us. What, then, does it mean in this model to distinguish between primary and secondary objects? It may just mean this: when we experience the world, the objects that our discriminatory capacities reveal are the primary objects of our intentional acts, whereas the secondary objects are apprehended only indistinctly.

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<sup>14</sup> These revisions lead to Brentano's new project of a pure 'descriptive psychology'. In the context of this project Brentano mainly focussed on inner perception which he describes as the immediate noticing of one's own mental phenomena. See Brentano (1982/1995).

In a later manuscript on the nature of the self Brentano applies the same idea. He therefore changes the example of hearing a sound to the slightly more complex case of hearing a chord:

“[T]here is a two-fold way in which a thing may be said to be an object of awareness: it may be explicit and distinct or it may be implicit and indistinct. If one hears a chord and distinguishes the notes which are contained in it, then one has a distinctive awareness of the fact that he hears it. But if one does not distinguish the particular notes, then one has only an indistinct awareness of them. [...]. Self-awareness, too, is sometimes distinct and sometimes indistinct.” (Brentano 1933/1981, p.117)

This passage is remarkable for several reasons. First, Brentano removes here any doubt that his concept of inner consciousness is indeed a concept of self-awareness. This was somehow unclear since Brentano carefully avoided in his *Psychology* the use of terms like self and self-awareness. His goal was to develop a metaphysically “pure” theory of mental phenomena without mentioning as far as possible an entity that could be called a self. But his plan was, as I mentioned above in section 1, to lift this constraint in later parts of this work. The passage above shows how natural this transition would have been, since his notion of inner consciousness provided Brentano already with a basic conception of self-awareness.

The passage also reveals that Brentano allows self-awareness to vary on a scale: it can be more or less distinct.<sup>15</sup> This goes against the presumption that inner consciousness is all we need to gain mental self-knowledge. Brentano here rejects this presumption, and he provides a good reason for doing so: self-awareness can be less than fully developed. The passage quoted above continues as follows:

“If a person feels a pain, then he is aware of himself as one that feels the pain. But perhaps he does not distinguish the substance, which here feels pain, from the accident by means of which the substance appears to him. It may well be that animals have only [such] an indistinct self-awareness.” (ibid.)

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<sup>15</sup> In saying that Brentano “allows” self-awareness to vary by degree, I only want to suggest that this is consistent with what he says. Brentano himself only speaks of *two* ways in which an object can be grasped, namely either distinctly or indistinctly. This makes it easier to integrate this new distinction with the older one between the intentional relation to a primary object and to a secondary object.

Brentano could have mentioned also children in this connection. Young children also have a more primitive form of self-awareness compared to the reflective capacities of adults. Even if Brentano leaves much implicit here, a plausible way of interpreting his remarks would seem to be the following: animals and children have only an indistinct self-awareness because they do not have the capacity to apprehend their own mental states as primary objects in inner observation. They can apprehend them only as secondary objects, which means that they have only a pre-reflective form of self-awareness.

So, what is pre-reflective self-awareness according to Brentano? If my interpretation is correct, his basic point is that we should *not* think of it as a mental phenomenon completely different from reflective self-awareness. There are not two *kinds* of self-awareness to be distinguished here. Although a distinction can be drawn between inner perception and inner observation, in doing so we describe just one mental capacity of self-perception that makes us aware of our own mental life in different degrees.

In the remaining part of this paper I want to elaborate this interpretation further by connecting it to the current discussion between one-level and higher-order theories of consciousness.

## 6. OBJECTIONS FROM A HIGHER-ORDER PERSPECTIVE

Representational theories have played a central role in recent work on the nature of consciousness (see Seager 1999). Much of this work has been devoted to exploring the phenomenal features of sensory experience. The theoretical stance taken by representational theories is a more general however. The aim of such theories is to show that *all* aspect of consciousness can be adequately explained within this approach. This includes also self-awareness in all its many forms. Whether or not one subscribes to the ubiquity thesis according to which every perceptual experience includes a pre-reflective form of self-awareness, the mere fact that self-awareness of this form exists puts it on the agenda for representational theories.

Brentano's *Psychology* is widely acknowledged in this context as containing an early version of a representational theory of consciousness. But how exactly does Brentano's theory fit into this contemporary framework? This has turned out to be a delicate question of interpretation. While some scholars take Brentano's theory to be a precursor of a higher-order theory of consciousness, others interpret it as an early version

of a one-level theory. I will argue here that both interpretations are unsatisfactory, partly for exegetical reasons and partly because they make Brentano's theory vulnerable to objections that seem to me to miss their target. I will therefore use these objections here to reveal the weaknesses of these interpretations and then to show how my alternative interpretation may do better.

I first consider two objections that have been raised against Brentano's theory from a higher-order perspective. For my purposes here it will not matter whether this perspective is fleshed out in terms of a perceptualist or a non-perceptualist model of higher-order representations (see Lycan 1996, Carruthers 2000). It also will not matter whether one takes consciousness to arise from occurrent or from merely dispositional higher-order states. I set aside here these (important) questions for the sake of argument. The objections I want to address are objections raised specifically by David Rosenthal, and so I will use his higher-order thought theory (HOT-theory for short) as a background for my discussion (see Rosenthal 2005).

Let us go back again to Brentano's original example of hearing a sound. The three components that make up this conscious experience according to Brentano may be translated into a HOT theory as follows:

the sound (= S)

a perceptual representation of the sound (= PR)

a higher-order thought with the content that one currently perceives a sound (= HOT)

Let us suppose that this is a plausible way of interpreting Brentano's example. Then we need to consider what relations obtain between these three elements, in particular between the higher-order thought (HOT) and the perceptual representation of the sound (PR). If we follow Rosenthal's own theory, this relation is constrained by only one condition: the thought and the perceptual representation have to occur "roughly simultaneously". This is not so in the case of Brentano's theory. Brentano requires this relation to be much stronger. We therefore need to consider how these further constraints that Brentano places on this relation might be captured within the framework of a higher-order thought theory.

This is where Rosenthal's criticism sets in. He argues that these further constraints are unjustified because they arise from a Cartesian conception of the mind (see Rosenthal 2005, p.35ff.). Like Descartes, Brentano takes mental states to be *necessarily* conscious. Therefore he needs to make this relation tighter in order to rule out that the first-order component and the higher-order component might come apart. But why should we rule this



out? It is quite possible that one hears a sound without having any thoughts about this hearing event. And conversely, it is possible to think about perceiving something without actually doing so. This is exactly what we should expect from a representational theory, and it is a virtue of such theories that they thereby overcome this Cartesian prejudice. Instead of demanding a closer relationship here we should drop the Cartesian premise that motivates this demand.

I do not think that this objection has much force. As I indicated earlier, there is a way of understanding Brentano's decision to identify mental phenomena with conscious experiences that does not ground this decision in a problematic Cartesian doctrine. It suffices to say that conscious mental states and experiences are the prototypical cases of mental phenomena. In principle, Brentano could therefore make room in his theory for unconscious thoughts and even unconscious perceptions. This would not damage his theory decisively. Most importantly, it would not remove his reasons for requesting a relation stronger than a mere temporal overlap between the first-order and the higher-order components of an experience. Something more is needed here to produce a *unified* conscious experience, Brentano would say.

But Rosenthal has another, more profound objection to Brentano's theory. He argues that Brentano relies on a principle of individuating mental states which is implausible (see Rosenthal 2005, p.65ff). In order to show this, Rosenthal compares mental acts with linguistic acts. He points out that speech acts can be individuated in either of two ways: according to their truth-conditions or according to their performance conditions. For instance, the statements 'It is raining' and 'I believe it is raining' differ in truth conditions, but they have the same performance conditions. Whenever I sincerely assert 'It is raining', I could also sincerely say 'I assert that it is raining', and conversely. Nevertheless my first statement will be false and the second true if it is not raining. This shows that two statements with the same performance condition can differ in their truth conditions. Does something similar hold for mental acts? According to Rosenthal, this is what Brentano tacitly presupposes: "He [i.e. Brentano] maintains that my hearing a sound and my thought that I hear it are one and the same mental act. And he goes on to insist that the very content of that perception must be contained in the content of any higher-order thought about it, thus reasoning from performance conditions to mental content. Accordingly, he concludes, every mental state is, in part, about itself" (Rosenthal 2005, p.65).

Rosenthal's argument against Brentano here is this: consider the first-order thought with the content [It is raining] and the second-order thought with the content [I believe it is raining]. These are doubtless different thoughts. Why should anyone think that one could grasp them in a single mental act? In making this claim, Brentano must be confused. He correctly saw that both elements are needed for making up a conscious experience, but he simply went too far in requesting that these elements have to be part of a single mental act. Higher-order thoughts can give rise to conscious experiences without having to be *part* of such an experience.

This objection does have force. It is not decisive against Brentano's theory, however, because its force depends on an assumption to which Brentano is not committed. Rosenthal assumes in this objection that a conscious experience requires a higher-order thought with an articulated content that is expressible in a sentence of the form 'I am now experiencing such and such'. This assumption makes it so implausible to say that one and the same mental state can at the same time represent a sensory quality and a higher-order content. It now becomes important that Brentano discards this assumption, as we have seen. He allows mental states to have an "indistinct" intentional content, which clearly implies that it is not sufficiently articulated to be expressible in language. Mental states of this kind may therefore be individuated according to their functional role or "performance condition", not in terms of a finer grained set of truth-conditions.

Rosenthal could reply that it still does not make sense to say that the same mental state can have the functional role of an experience *and* also the functional role of a higher-order thought directed at this very experience. No criterion of individuation can merge these two states together because this would mean to confuse a higher-order representation with its own object. But why not consider this to be problem of the higher-order approach that need not arise for Brentano's theory. The merging of mental states becomes quite plausible if this "fusion" occurs at the level of content.<sup>16</sup> If a subject does not clearly distinguish between her experience of hearing a sound and the sound she experiences, she is simply not in a position to form a higher-order thought about her experience. While she may be aware of her experience, she has no clear conception of *what* she is experiencing. That removes the ground for attributing to her a higher-order thought in addition to her experience. We might say that integral to her experience is an act of inner monitoring that does not yet produce full-fledged higher-order thoughts.

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<sup>16</sup> This idea of "fusing together" first-order and higher-order states is also emphasized by Mark Textor in his reconstruction of Brentano's theory. See Textor 2006.

## 7. AN OBJECTION FROM A ONE-LEVEL PERSPECTIVE

Higher-order representations are an important tool in our mental toolbox. But are such metarepresentational capacities needed for having a simple conscious experience? Advocates of one-level theories hold the view that such abilities are dispensable in explaining the nature of conscious experience (see Dretske 1995, Tye 1995). Following their line, scholars have pointed out that the correct way to understand Brentano's theory from a contemporary perspective is to interpret it as a one-level theory (see Thomasson 2000, Smith 2004).

Two reasons make it attractive to conceive of Brentano's theory in this way. On the one hand, advocates of a one-level interpretation point out that higher-order explanations of consciousness face a number of serious problems. It would therefore be simply uncharitable to project such a theory into Brentano's writings. Since I do not want to engage in a discussion of higher-order representational theories here, I will ignore this possible defense of a one-level interpretation. Instead, I want to comment briefly on another issue that divides the advocates of a one-level interpretation. The issue is whether Brentano's theory is successful in dealing with a problem that is known as "the regress problem" (see Brentano 1874/1995, p. 124).

Higher-order theorists like Rosenthal dismiss this problem as yet another residue of the Cartesian tradition. In their view, the problem vanishes as soon as one accepts that higher-order states may be completely unconscious. Once this is granted, second-order thoughts need not be accompanied by a third-level thought, and so on. Only *conscious* mental states depend on the presence of a higher-level mental representation. Whether or not this is a viable response to the problem does not matter here. It is a solution that was not available to Brentano, and so, it seems, he needed a one-level theory to fix this problem.

But critics of Brentano have pointed out that Brentano's solution, though ingenious, may not be effective (see Zahavi 1998, 2004, 2006; Drummond 2006). The details of this discussion are complicated, and the arguments often are far from clear. Basically, the objection seems to be that in order to block this regress one needs an account of pre-reflective self-awareness that does not "inflate" the intentional structure of mental states. Brentano's theory is still vulnerable to this problem because he adds further objects into the internal structure of an experience. Another way to understand the objection is to

compare it with an argument that Dieter Henrich and Manfred Frank use in criticizing the subject-object model of consciousness. This model, so their objection goes, can only explain what it means to be conscious of objects outside our own minds, but misses the basic self-directed awareness that we have of our own mental states (see Frank 1991). Similarly, Zahavi argues that one cannot explain the inner consciousness contained in our experiences by simply adding some further component to the structure of these mental states (Zahavi 2004, 2006).

Since the objection is not very clear, it is hard to respond to it. I will therefore only briefly mention two recent proposals to which one might appeal here:

One proposal starts by defending Brentano's principle of individuating mental acts. Uriah Kriegel has taken up this line and uses it as a cornerstone for his own self-representational analysis of the nature of consciousness (see Kriegel 2003a, 2003b, Kriegel & Williford 2006). Other defenders of Brentano have gone a step further. They concede to the phenomenological critique that a purely representational explanation of self-awareness will not remove the threat of a regress. One therefore needs to enrich such theories with a non-representational element. When Brentano says that in hearing a sound we are aware not only of the sound but also aware of the hearing of the sound, this statement includes a non-representational use of the term 'being aware of'. Although the term occurs twice in this statement, the only relation it describes is the relation between the subject and the object he or she perceives. If one searches here for another representational, or even self-representational relation, one is misled by the grammar of this term. The best way to combat this is to paraphrase the above statement as follows: in hearing a sound we are aware of the sound in a *conscious mode*; or simply: we are *consciously* aware of this sound (see Smith 2004).

This is not the place to discuss these proposals in detail. Whatever their merits may be, however, the question is whether they can fully remove the doubts nurtured by the regress problem. The following consideration might show why this still remains a challenge for any neo-Brentanist theory. It seems that no theory that retains the core features of Brentano's theory of inner consciousness can be a strictly first-order theory. The distinction between primary and secondary objects, which is central to Brentano's theory, introduces some kind of level-distinction into the structure of experience. Perhaps, the best way to describe this peculiar feature of Brentano's theory in a representational

framework is to classify his theory as “one-and-a-half-level” theory.<sup>17</sup> Once a level-distinction is admitted, however, worries about the regress will re-appear. So neo-Brentanists face a dilemma: either they opt for a strictly one-level approach that does not adequately capture the nature of Brentano’s theory, or they have to admit that no fully satisfactory response to the regress problem can be given within the limits of Brentano’s theory.

Is there a way out of this dilemma? I am not sure. But the interpretation that I have advocated opens up for us here another way out. It shows that there is a way of interpreting Brentano’s theory that does not allow this dilemma to arise in the first place. How does this work? The line one can take here is this: the important point that other interpretations overlook is that according to Brentano our inner awareness, like any awareness, can be more or less distinct in picking out objects from a certain domain. We can therefore say that we are aware of our mental states to a higher or lesser degree. When this degree is high, we can focus on our experiences as primary objects, when it is low, we can only be aware of them as secondary objects. There are two levels involved here – a primary and a secondary awareness – but *this* distinction is of a completely different nature and thus does not threaten to start an infinite regress.<sup>18</sup>

It is clear from the second book of Brentano’s *Psychology* that he took the regress problem very seriously. His initial solution was simply to say that a mental state can take itself as secondary object. This response has the flavor of an *ad hoc* solution. However, when one reconsiders this solution in the light of his later distinction between distinct and indistinct forms of awareness, one can see how this idea may be embedded in a more general epistemological context. This makes Brentano’s response to the regress problem more powerful, without forcing his account of inner awareness into the mould of a one-level representational theory.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I have been concerned with a pair of ideas that have engaged philosophers in various traditions: the idea that self-awareness can take a reflective and a pre-reflective form, and the idea that a form of pre-reflective self-awareness is built into the very

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<sup>17</sup> Representational theories that are of this intermediary type have been recently proposed by Robert Lurz (2003), Uriah Kriegel (2006, 2009), and Rocco Gennaro (2006).

<sup>18</sup> A response to the regress-objection along these lines has also been suggested by Kenneth Williford. See Williford (2006).

structure of our conscious experiences. Brentano's *Psychology* incorporates both ideas. I have tried to explain the two major tools that Brentano uses in his theory of inner awareness: the distinction between primary and secondary objects and the distinction between inner perception and inner observation. Both distinctions have given rise to different interpretations, and they have invited several objections. By interpreting these distinctions from a new angle, I showed how certain presuppositions on which these objections rest can be questioned and how these objections may thus be dispelled.

Of course, there are many questions about pre-reflective self-awareness that Brentano's theory does not answer or even tries to answer. My goal was to highlight just one feature in Brentano's theory that in my view lifts it above its rivals. This core idea is that inner consciousness is not necessarily a clear form of self-awareness. From an empirical point of view, this is a great advantage of his theory because in many domains we find forms of self-awareness that are less than clear: when we look at the way in which we use perceptual information to control our actions, in the way in which we use knowledge to control our emotions, in the way in which we use our memory to reconstruct our own past, and in the way in which we project our own future. In all these cases, we find experiences that have the semi-reflective structure that Brentano describes in his theory.

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