

to appear in: U. Kriegel (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Brentano and the Brentano School*.
Routledge 2017.

Truth in Brentano

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How to understand Brentano's account of truth is a question of some controversy. A number of different views have been put forward as positions that Brentano held at some stage in his career. The received view has it that the early Brentano subscribed to a form of correspondence theory which he later rejected in favor of a definition of truth in terms of correct judging, where the correctness of a judgment is defined in terms of the notion of self-evidence (see Kraus 1966, Szrednicki 1965, Stegmüller 1969, Kamitz 1983, Chrudzimski 2001). This fundamental shift in Brentano's view is regarded as a change from an ontological to a "gnoseological", i.e. epistemic, theory of truth (see Kastil 1934). Brentano's mature view is sometimes said to resemble a neo-Kantian conception of truth or related views (see Kraus 1966, van der Schaar 1999, 2003), it has been compared with a coherence theory of truth (see Krantz 1990/91), and it is regarded as embracing a form of alethic anti-realism that places a substantial epistemic constraint on the concept of truth (see Künné 2003). More recently, Charles Parsons suggested that the early Brentano may also be regarded as a precursor of a deflationist theory of truth (see Parsons 2004). Following up on this proposal, the received view has been challenged by a new interpretation that ascribes to Brentano a deflationist position that he held throughout his career in combination with the view that truth pertains primarily to self-evident judgment (see Brandl forthcoming).

Section 1 first summarizes the received view and then indicates two problems raised by this interpretation. Section 2 explains in which sense Brentano may have been a deflationist and how this interpretation avoids the problems of the received view.

1. The Received View on Brentano's Account of Truth

In 1930, Oskar Kraus first published, under the title *Wahrheit und Evidenz (The True and the Evident, 1966)*, a collection of writings by Brentano on truth. In the introduction to this collection Kraus presents a narrative that he followed in organising the volume: Part I of his collection is supposed to represent Brentano's early view as it is expressed most clearly in a lecture, "On the concept of truth", that Brentano delivered to the Vienna Philosophical Society in 1889. This view Brentano is said to have held until about 1901-2. In part II Kraus presents documents from what he describes as a transitional period during which Brentano came to reject the correspondence theory and moved towards his later doctrine that only real things exist and form the proper objects of our thoughts ('reism'; see CHAP. 16). At this time Brentano presumably also discovered the importance of self-evident judgments for our understanding of the concept of truth. Part III in Kraus's collection finally documents what Kraus calls Brentano's mature view, according to which our concept of truth is grounded in the experience of self-evident judgments.

Kraus, and many scholars after him, have done much to flesh out this narrative with further details. One important point concerns Brentano's criticism of the correspondence theory in its classical form. According to Brentano, the theory is built on the mistaken premise that all judgements have a subject-predicate form. Thus it is presumed that a judgement of the form 'S is P' is true if and only if a relation of instantiation holds between the object and the property denoted by the terms 'S' and 'P' respectively. Brentano challenges this view by pointing out that it does not apply to simple judgements of the form 'S exists', because the predicate 'exist' does not denote a property. Brentano goes even further in suggesting that all judgements can be represented as having non-propositional content: they are judgements that either accept or reject the existence of an object (see CHAP. 10). While this undermines the classical correspondence theory, which focuses on correspondence between propositions and facts, it still leaves open the possibility of a non-traditional correspondence theory, where the correspondence is between judgments and entities other than facts.

This has led advocates of the received view to propose that Brentano experimented with various ontological innovations to revise and improve the correspondence theory. In the case of a positive judgement, they take him to consider non-real objects ("*irrealia*") as potential objects corresponding with true judgements.

For instance, the judgement ‘There was a king’ is about a real king that may no longer exist, but the judgment nevertheless corresponds with something, namely with a propositional entity that is not a real thing for Brentano. Entities like the existence of a former king are sometimes called ‘states of affairs’. In the case of negative judgements, similar moves may be considered. The judgement ‘There are no unicorns’, despite being a judgment about something non-existing, may be said to correspond with the state of affairs that no unicorns exist. Equally, the statement ‘No object can be both round and square’ may be said to correspond with the impossibility of round squares or with the necessary state of affairs that a figure instantiating both properties does not exist (see Chrudzimski 2001: 60).

Turning now to Brentano’s mature conception of truth, the received view holds that Brentano arrived at this view because of his scruples to inflate ontology too much in order to meet the demands of the correspondence theory. The idea that truth pertains primarily to self-evident judgements seemed to offer him an alternative. But it required the solution of another problem, since self-evidence is found only in judgments that are infallible or at least beyond any reasonable doubt. According to Brentano, there are two areas in which we can judge with self-evidence: when we make judgements whose denial would lead to an obvious contradiction, or when we form judgements on the basis of inner perception. An example of a self-evident judgment of the first kind would be the judgment that every cause has an effect or that two is not identical with one. These are axioms that are beyond any reasonable doubt and therefore self-evident. The same holds according to Brentano when we judge about the existence of a current sensation or consider whether every judgement presupposes the presentation of an object. Provided that inner perception clearly shows us what we are judging in these cases, we cannot doubt that what it shows us exists, and therefore these judgements are also self-evident (see Brentano 1966b: 123-34).

Now the problem is that judgements may be true without being self-evident, or as Brentano says, despite being “blind” judgements (1966b: 110). This is why Brentano suggests, according to the received view, that a definition of truth involves two parts: it defines truth first for self-evident judgements and secondly for those judgements that are not self-evident. In an undated manuscript that the editors presume not to have been written before 1914, Brentano says:

“a true judgement” means originally as much as a self-evident judgment. In the secondary sense also, a non-self-evident judgment is called true, if it corresponds in all other respects with a self-evident one. (transl. in Szrednicki 1965: 135)ⁱ

There are two respects in which a blind judgement must agree with a self-evident one to be true: the judgement must have the same object and it must have the same quality, which means that it must be a positive judgment if the self-evident judgment is positive, or a negative judgment if the self-evident judgment is negative. What is not required in this explication is a correspondence relation between a true judgment and some thing in reality. Such a relation does not obtain in those cases when a self-evident judgment denies the existence of an object. In the quotation above, Brentano still speaks of a form of correspondence, but this is a relation between two judgements, namely a blind judgement and a self-evident one. As Brentano makes clear in other passages, this relation is not a normal one, since the requirement merely says that a true judgement agrees with how a subject *would* judge if she were to make the same judgement with self-evidence (see 1966b: 122).

Given the texts collected by Kraus, the narrative of Brentano’s changing views on truth may seem completely convincing. Doubts about this interpretation arise, however, when one considers the costs of this interpretation. The received view seems to be uncharitable to Brentano in several respects.

First, it downgrades the importance of his earlier writings on truth. This includes not only the Vienna lecture of 1889, but also his Würzburg lectures on Metaphysics, where Brentano already exposes his main points in a chapter entitled “*Vom On Hos Alethes*” (On Being in the Sense of Truth, MS 96: 104-13).

Secondly, the received view is uncharitable to Brentano because it assumes that he overlooked the obvious problems that ensue from allowing non-real things to appear in a correspondence relation with true judgments. Suppose that a subject correctly judges that there are no humans with three legs but falsely judges that there are no tables with three legs either. Both judgements may have as “correlates”, as Brentano puts it, a non-real thing (or rather pseudo-thing): the non-existence of three-legged humans and the non-existence of three-legged tables. These objects may be said to correlate with the two judgements like ‘being left to’ correlates with ‘being right to’ or ‘cause’ correlates with ‘effect’. But if such correlates can be introduced for every

judgment, then one cannot explain the difference between a true and a false judgement by saying that the former, but not the latter, corresponds with a non-real thing (see Brandl, forthcoming).

Thirdly, as several commentators have noted, Brentano's mature view that truth pertains primarily to self-evident judgments raises some serious problems when considered as a definition of truth (see Stegmüller 1969, Kamitz 1983, Küne 2003). Perhaps the most severe problem is that such a definition becomes circular unless one is willing to give up a very basic realist intuition. Suppose we ask how a subject would respond to a question '*p*?' when the answer is not known to us, and suppose we add that we are assuming that this person will know the answer on the basis of a self-evident judgment. If we have no independent reason to believe that the person we ask possesses such knowledge, we must find out ourselves what the answer to our question is. How else should we know how someone would judge in this case, whether or not she does so with self-evidence? This consideration strongly suggests that the question 'Is *p* true?' is more basic than the question 'What would a person's self-evident judgment be in this matter?'. But if the question 'Is *p* true?' is the basic one here, then a definition of truth that includes the clause 'how a subject would judge with self-evidence' becomes circular.

The circularity is unavoidable given our realist intuitions. From this perspective, a judgement is not true *because* it would agree with a self-evident judgement, but conversely: it would agree with a self-evident judgement because it is true. A definition of truth in terms of self-evidence therefore seems to be warranted only if one gives up this realist view and conceives of the agreement between true and self-evident judgments as that which makes a true judgement true. Such a view might be congenial to advocates of some version of idealism. That Brentano subscribed to a view with such implications is hard to believe.

2. The New Interpretation

Charles Parsons was the first to note that Brentano's early writings on truth do not necessarily support the view that the received interpretation ascribes to him. While Brentano talks in his 1889 lecture as if his goal was a mere revision of the correspondence theory, what he actually proposed at the end of this lecture was a much bolder idea. He makes clear that in explicating the concept of truth we can do completely

without the notion of ‘correspondence’ or any of its cognates like ‘harmonizing with reality’ or ‘fitting with reality’. This is what his final conclusion reveals:

Following Aristotle’s statement ... we can say: a judgment is true if it asserts of some object that is, *that* the object is, or if it asserts of some object that is not, *that* the object is not – and a judgment is false if it contradicts that which is, or that which is not. (Brentano 1966b: 21) ⁱⁱ

This statement is not only reminiscent of similar claims in Aristotle, it also anticipates the equivalence principles that deflationists currently use in explicating the meaning of the predicate ‘true’, for instance the principle used in Horwich’s minimalist theory of truth:

(E) The proposition that p is true if and only if p .

According to Horwich, it is the “underived acceptance of the equivalence schema” that constitutes the meaning of the truth-predicate (Horwich 2010: 27). The principle that Brentano derives from Aristotle differs from schema (E) in using object-variables instead of propositional variables. It therefore accords nicely with Brentano’s claim that in making a judgment we are not accepting a proposition as true, but we are accepting objects as existing or rejecting them as non-existing. A slightly more perspicuous formulation of the principle makes this transparent:

(B) A judgment of the form ‘X exists’, ‘X does not exist’, ‘No X exists’, or ‘No non-X exists’ is true, respectively, if and only if an X exists, an X does not exist, a non-X exists, or a non-X does not exist.

Another important difference between this principle and principle (E) concerns the limited generality of (B). As it stands, it is not a principle about *all* judgments but only about those of a particular form. Brentano believed, however, that he had a method for overcoming this restriction. His plan was to show that all judgments either have existential form or can be explained as combinations of such judgments (see Brandl 2014; also CHAP. 10). If one grants Brentano that this is possible – and this is of course a large concession – principle (B) may be considered as equally powerful as principle (E).

Parsons restricts his claim that Brentano was a precursor of contemporary deflationism to Brentano’s early period. He agrees in this with the received view that in his later years Brentano held a theory of truth that must count as robust, since it defines

truth in epistemic terms. But in this respect, too, an alternative interpretation is available.

Brentano mentions already in his 1889 lecture that defining a concept (either implicitly or explicitly) is not the only way one can explicate it. As a concept empiricist, he believes that we could not understand a concept if we had not appropriate experiences on which our understanding is grounded: “The ultimate and most effective means of elucidation”, Brentano says, “must consist in an appeal to the individual’s intuition, from which all our general criteria are derived” (1966b: 24-5).

There is then no need to ascribe to Brentano a new definition of truth when he refers to self-evident judgments as the primary bearers of truth. His concept empiricism suffices to explain what Brentano has here in mind, namely an argument that leads him to reject Kant’s epistemology. Kant’s conception of synthetic a priori judgements is closely related to his doctrine that some of our concepts are pure concepts of reason. Space and time are two primary examples of concepts that are not derived from experience, according to Kant. Brentano rejects this claim as unfounded and offers instead an empiricist explication of space and time. In a nutshell, Brentano says that these concepts are constructed on the basis of spatial and temporal experiences. We have experiences of things in our vicinity, and experiences of past, present, and future. We also notice a structure in these experiences. Once such structure is apparent, we can go on to construct on this basis the concept of a three-dimensional infinite space, or the concept of a temporal continuum that forms another dimension in multi-dimensional space-time (see Brentano 1925: 26f.).

Following the same line, we can see how Brentano applies concept empiricism to the concept of truth. He starts from experiences of self-evident judgements that provide us with a basis for constructing this concept. Self-evidence here is not a subjective feeling of certainty, or a compulsion to judge this way or that way, as Brentano emphasizes. Therefore, he is confident that a notion of truth based on such experiences can pass as an objective notion.

This interpretation overcomes the problems facing the received view of Brentano’s account of truth. As a deflationist, Brentano has no need to appeal to non-real (pseudo-)things as the terms of a correspondence relation. When Brentano introduced non-real things, he did this in the context of his theory of intentionality, where he

considered non-real things as playing the role of mere objects of thought (see CHAP. 4) From this one should not conclude that he gave these objects also an important role to play in his account of truth. Equally, the difficulty with explicating truth in terms of self-evident judging disappears. That the experience of self-evidence is indispensable for acquiring the concept of truth, as Brentano claims, does not imply that it is also indispensable to the nature or essence of truth. The deflationist principle (B) makes this clear, since it contains neither the concept of ‘correspondence’ nor the concept of ‘self-evidence’. The question therefore remains, whether Brentano ever moved beyond his early deflationist position. The following passage from a manuscript dated March 2015 provides evidence that he elaborated the same idea only further:

Can we find some other interpretation for ‘*adaequatio*’ which might make the thesis [veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus] more acceptable? My answer would be that the thesis tells us no more nor less than this: Anyone who judges that a certain thing exists, or that it does not exist, or that it is possible, or impossible, or that it is thought of by someone, or that it is believed, or loved, or hated, or that it has existed, or will exist, *judges truly* provided that the thing in question does exist, or does not exist, or is possible, or is impossible, or is thought of, etc. (Brentano 1966b: 122)

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ⁱ The manuscript, entitled "Kurzer Abriß einer allgemeinen Erkenntnislehre", was published in an earlier collection of Brentano's epistemological writings (Brentano 1925) and therefore not included in Kraus's collection of 1930. It is translated and published with related material not included in Kraus's collection in the appendix of Szrednicki 1965. The translation in Szrednicki 1965 has been amended by replacing 'evident' by 'self-evident'.

ⁱⁱ I corrected the English translation to make it fit the German original: „wahr sei ein Urteil dann, wenn es von etwas, was ist, behaupte, dass es sei; und von etwas, was nicht ist, leugne, dass es sei." Chisholm unfortunately translates „leugnen, dass ist" as "asserting that is not", thereby mislocating the negation in the content and not in the quality of the judgment.