

to appear in: *The Monist* (2017).

## Was Brentano an Early Deflationist about Truth?

Johannes L. Brandl

University of Salzburg

### ABSTRACT

It is often assumed that deflationist accounts of truth are a product of philosophy of logic and language in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this paper I show why this assumption is historically short-sighted. An early version of deflationism about truth can already be found in Brentano's 1889 lecture "On the concept of truth". That Brentano is a precursor of deflationism has gone largely unnoticed because of a different reception of his lecture: according to most scholars, Brentano proposes in it a revision of the correspondence theory of truth that he came to reject only in later years. Contrary to this received interpretation, I argue that Brentano actually tried to show how one can minimize an account of truth without thereby sacrificing a robust realist intuition about the objectivity of truth. Brentano held on to this deflationist view even in his later years, when he assigned self-evident judgements a primary role in our understanding of truth.

### INTRODUCTION

The history of truth theories consists of attempts to answer the question 'What is truth?' in the most general way. To what extent can this request be met? It seems easy enough to say in a particular case what makes a belief true or false, but can we also explain what distinguishes *any* true and false belief, *any* true and false assertion, *any* true and false proposition, etc.? Doubts about the possibility of meeting this demand have inspired so-called deflationist responses. Deflationists decline the invitation to give a substantive answer to the question

‘What is truth?’ and instead seek to elucidate the meaning of the predicate ‘true’ in other ways.

The history of deflationary approaches to truth still needs to be written. In this paper I show that important pieces of that history can be found in the work of Franz Brentano. This is not just to say that Brentano made some cursory remarks pointing in this direction. Brentano had a quite specific plan for how to turn a substantive theory of truth into a minimalist one. He was moved in this direction by dissatisfaction with the correspondence theory, but also by his refusal to go along with contemporary neo-Kantian proposals to define truth in normative terms. In opposing this trend of his time, Brentano tried to remain faithful to the principles of Aristotelian metaphysics and Cartesian epistemology. However, he managed to filter out of these traditions a position that is quite unique and resembles in interesting ways deflationist positions currently on offer.

That Brentano was an early deflationist is far from obvious. Usually he is ascribed one of two quite different conceptions. On the received view of his work on truth, Brentano was an advocate of the correspondence theory in his early years, defending it against neo-Kantian attacks, and later shifted to an epistemic theory that equates truth with correct judgment. He still opposed neo-Kantian views, however, by insisting that what makes a judgment correct is either its self-evidence or the fact that it agrees in all relevant respects with a potential self-evident judgment. Taking it to be Brentano’s mature theory, this latter view is considered to be his original contribution to the history of truth-theories.<sup>1</sup>

As I argue elsewhere, there are good reasons to doubt the legitimacy of the received position regarding Brentano’s changing views on truth (see Brandl, forthcoming). Here I focus on presenting an alternative interpretation that locates Brentano in the context of the debate between robust and deflationary theories of truth. Section 1 introduces the core assumptions shared by various kinds of deflationism. Section 2 locates Brentano’s 1889 lecture ‘On the concept of truth’ in the deflationist tradition. Section 3 explores how in

adopting this position, Brentano manages to retain his realist convictions without taking on board the ontological baggage carried by the correspondence theory. Section 4 claims that Brentano continued to be a deflationist even in his later years, when he made much of the claim that truth is primarily found in self-evident judgments. I conclude that actually his mature view is an expression of his concept empiricism, which Brentano accepted throughout his career and which is compatible with his deflationism about the nature of truth.

## 1. DEFLATIONIST APPROACHES TO TRUTH

Deflationism is the view that one neither can give a substantive answer to the question ‘What is truth?’ nor needs to in order to explicate the meaning of the term ‘true’. This view has been developed in various forms in recent years (see Künne 2003, Horwich 2010, and Wrenn 2015). While it is common to refer to Frege, Ramsey, or Wittgenstein as the founders of contemporary deflationism (see e.g., Blackburn & Moore 1999), no one except Charles Parsons mentions that Brentano is also part of this tradition (see Parsons 2004, 187). This neglect may be partly explained by the fact that Brentano’s work is generally perceived as inaugurating the phenomenological movement, in which deflationist ideas have played so far no recognizable role. But in their early days the analytic and the phenomenological traditions were not so far apart that relocating Brentano’s work on truth would seem impossible.

This said, there is a major obstacle for such a project that needs to be removed. Current advocates of deflationism take either sentences or propositions as the primary bearers of truth, while Brentano ascribes truth primarily to mental things, namely to judgments. Moreover, Brentano denies that judgments have a propositional content. That makes Brentano a rather idiosyncratic figure in the history of truth theories. But while the question of truth-bearers is an important one, I submit that it should not prevent us from exploring the commonalities between his views and the deflationist tradition in analytic philosophy.

Abstracting from this question is also helpful when one tries to give a general characterization of the basic principles of deflationism. I am following here Paul Horwich who identifies four principles to which a deflationist can subscribe independently of what stance he takes on the question of truth bearers (see Horwich 2010, 14):

1. The predicate ‘true’ has a special kind of utility due to its idiosyncratic conceptual function.
2. The concept of truth cannot be explicitly defined due to its lack of content.
3. There are no facts about truth that must be taken as metaphysically basic facts.
4. Claims 1–3 have important consequences in epistemology, logic, and philosophy of language.

What the consequences of claims 1–3 are depends on further claims that specific theories may add here. The different brands of deflationism include the redundancy theory, the disquotational theory, the sentence-variable theory, the prosentential theory, and Horwich’s own version of a minimalist theory of truth.<sup>2</sup> In what follows, my concern is to show that Brentano shares a common ground with these theories without taking on board – or even considering – their more specific claims. However, since it is difficult to speak about these general principles without considering any concrete theory that incorporates them, I will choose Horwich’s minimalist theory as my object of comparison.

A distinguishing feature of Horwich’s theory is that he takes propositions, not sentences, as primary truth-bearers. This allows him to ground his theory on an equivalence principle that does not refer to sentences of the object-language in a meta-language, and is therefore even simpler than the T-schema whereby a sentence ‘S’ is true if and only if S. The schema Horwich proposes is this:

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

In what sense is this principle basic? For Horwich it is the “underived acceptance of the equivalence schema” that constitutes the meaning of the truth-predicate (Horwich 2010, 27). This is the short version of his theory which, of course, needs to be spelled out further. Let me briefly mention three points that Horwich makes related to the core claims 1–3 listed above.

The first claim concerns the utility of the truth-predicate. From a linguistic standpoint one could refer to the fact that the truth-predicate in natural languages serves as a term of emphasis (“That is *true!*”) and as a term for making a concession (“True, I have done that”). But for Horwich the real utility of the truth-predicate shows itself when we employ it in generalizations. For instance, we need the truth-predicate to express that every sentence of the form ‘p or not-p’ is true. This shows why the truth-predicate is indispensable. It also shows that schema (E) is more than a denominalisation schema, as Künne presumes (see Künne 2003, 318). It is a tool for deriving general claims about truth by instantiation.

When it comes to defining the concept of truth, Horwich points out that the concept of truth resists an explicit definition because it neither expresses a natural property (like ‘water’), nor is a complex concept that may be defined by simpler ones (like ‘prime number’). It is also different from a strictly undefinable concept, however, since it can be implicitly defined with the equivalence schema (E).

Thirdly, what are the most fundamental facts about truth? According to Horwich, they are not facts that depend on any linguistic conventions or a practice of disquotation. The basic facts are stated by instantiations of the equivalence scheme (E). Because these facts are derivable from (E), they are neither capable nor in need of further explanation. Horwich calls them “superficial facts” about truth (Horwich 2010, 15).

Now, there is of course something provocative about such a theory. How could a profound question like ‘What is truth?’ have no deeper answer than what the equivalence principle (E) tells us? The minimalist considers this objection to rest on a misunderstanding. His theory is not intended to be a *complete* theory of truth. After giving a deflationist answer

to the question ‘What is truth?’, a minimalist is free to turn to metaphysical and epistemological questions about what makes a particular belief true, how we may find out whether some particular claim is true, and what makes a true belief valuable. But he takes such questions to presuppose a basic, deflationist understanding of truth. The point of deflationism therefore is not to rule out asking (and answering) such questions out of principle; its point is that these answers will always depend on the particular case and do not add up to a general substantive answer to the question ‘What is truth?’.

## 2. BRENTANOS MINIMALISM ABOUT TRUTH

In 1889 Brentano gave a lecture ‘On the concept of truth’ to the Vienna Philosophical Society in which he examines how the term ‘truth’ has become part of our scientific terminology.<sup>3</sup> In a historical overview he first argues that “all epoch-making thinkers after Aristotle” accepted some version of the correspondence theory (Brentano 1966, 13), and then goes on to criticize recent attempts to replace the Aristotelian conception. It is only towards the very end of the lecture that it becomes clear what Brentano is up to, namely to propose a complete deflation of the correspondence theory.

Since the point of his lecture has often been missed, it is worth quoting the relevant passage where Brentano imagines that his audience might be disappointed by his conclusions. For it may seem that his proposed definition of truth is “like that of one who defines the concept of effect by reference to that of cause, or the concept of the larger by that of the smaller” (Brentano 1966, 23). Explicating one term by a correlative one is pointless, Brentano agrees, if “one expression is just as well known and just as much in use as the other.” But then he goes on to defend his deflationist account of truth against the charge of being pointless or uninformative:

Nevertheless there are respects in which our investigation should be instructive. The fact that we will no longer look for more than is really given in the definition is itself of considerable value. Tautological expressions, even without conceptual analysis, may be of considerable use in the task of explication, if one of the two synonymous terms is less subject to misunderstanding than the other. (...) And thus we are protected from conceptual confusions and from the blunders to which so many have been led as a result of misunderstanding the definition [of truth as correspondence]. (Brentano 1966, 23)

As this quotation shows, Brentano here advocates a view quite similar to current forms of minimalism. One should not be misled by the fact that Brentano presents his view as if it were merely a new interpretation of the correspondence theory. (We will later see why he was not more straightforward in rejecting that theory.) When one locates his proposal in the debate between robust and deflationist theories, there can be no doubt that Brentano proposes a radical deflation of the correspondence theory, to such an extent that it no longer qualifies as a robust theory at all.

The linchpin of a minimalist theory of truth, we have seen, is an equivalence principle. Anticipating this idea, Brentano formulates the following (implicit) definition of the concept of truth:

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 1966, 21)<sup>4</sup>

This Aristotelian principle differs from principle (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). 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).

Let me now return to the objection that stating such a principle is as trivial as giving a definition of ‘cause’ in terms of ‘effect’. In reply to this objection Brentano could have referred to his goal of reducing all judgments to existential form, which is far from trivial. But this was not his concern in the lecture on truth. He wanted to show that it is not pointless to explicate the concept of truth, as he says, “without giving a conceptual analysis”. But how is his proposal different from defining cause in terms of effect?

This question takes us to the heart of Brentano’s deflationism. Principle (B) shows that the terms ‘true’ and ‘exist’ are indeed correlative terms, and each could be explained in terms of the other. Yet the analogy with ‘cause/effect’ or ‘larger/smaller’ fails because ‘truth’ and ‘existence’ do not stand for anything further that might explain this correlation. They do not pick out events that are necessarily occurring together, nor do they refer to properties or relations that are necessarily co-instantiated. In their case, the correlation is established exclusively by the equivalence schema (B). That this is Brentano’s view is confirmed when he says elsewhere that “it is impossible to give an analytic definition [eine zerlegende



Definition] of truth ... because the difference between a true and a false judgment is something elementary that must be experienced to be understood” (in Szrednicki 1965, 132). What this experience consists in, we will see later when we come to Brentano’s view of self-evident judgment. The point to emphasize here is that principle (B) establishes for Brentano a correlation between ‘truth’ and ‘existence’ that admits of no further explanation.

How then does Brentano try to convince his audience of his deflationist conclusion? First of all, he notes that his equivalence schema is not a tautology in the strict sense. It does not say that the term ‘truth’ is synonymous with ‘accepting an existing thing or rejecting a non-existing thing’. If these expressions were synonymous, the latter phrase could hardly be more illuminating than the former. Still, it is not clear what justifies him in saying that we have here an explication of truth that is “less subject to misunderstanding”.

Brentano continues this remark in a way that might seem a bit evasive. He points out that his account of truth helps to resolve equivocations that one finds in our common use of the term ‘true’. Sometimes it is the opposite of ‘false’, and sometimes the opposite of ‘non-real’, e.g., when we distinguish true gold from fake gold. Secondly, one must not assume that “such elucidation always requires some general determination”, by which he seems to mean a definition in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions (1966, 24). Taking up the point that we need an experience of truth for understanding it, he concludes that “the ultimate and most effective means of elucidation must ... consist in an appeal to the individual’s intuition, from which all our general criteria are derived” (1966, 24–25).

But the most obvious reason that speaks in favor of Brentano’s deflationist definition is the fact that it contains neither the predicate ‘correspond’ nor any of its cognates, like ‘fitting with’, ‘harmonizing with’, etc. After all, Brentano devoted the bulk of his lecture to highlighting the problems and misunderstandings that introducing such terms creates. Thus he argues at length that judgments are not true because they stand in a relation of similarity or identity to some object in reality. This misguided assumption goes hand in hand with the

equally mistaken view that all judgments have subject-predicate form, thereby suggesting that a parallel relation between objects and properties must hold in reality if the judgment is true. Brentano also uses here what some consider to be his Master Argument against the correspondence theory. The idea of correspondence, so the argument goes, leads to an infinite regress because any attempt to compare a judgement with a corresponding object or fact would require a further judgement since one can compare two things only if one first accepts their existence, and so on *ad infinitum* (see 1966, 24). More elaborate versions of these arguments can be found in later manuscripts, but the objections are already present in the 1889 lecture.

Advocates of the correspondence theory contend that Brentano overstated his case and that his objections are only partially successful (see Weingartner 1978). Although this is a legitimate concern, it is not something Brentano needs to worry about. Brentano does not need a water-tight argument against all possible versions of a correspondence theory, nor was his criticism intended as a complete refutation of that theory. His goal was to motivate minimalism about truth. In order to do so, it suffices to show that the notion of correspondence raises severe problems which are not easily resolved. If there is a way of explicating truth that avoids these problems, this is enough to recommend such an alternative way.

However, there are two other reasons why we need to take a second look at Brentano's criticism of the correspondence theory. There is, first, the question of whether Brentano's deflationism about truth is compatible with the Aristotelian realism that he defends against his neo-Kantian contemporaries. A second question is how long Brentano retained his minimalist view. The received view has it that the Vienna lecture only represents Brentano's early conception of truth and that he later developed a completely new epistemic theory of truth. I will argue that this interpretation misconstrues Brentano's position.

### 3. BRENTANO'S REALISM

If Brentano's initial goal was to reform the correspondence theory, he did this in a radical way that deprives it of much of its content. In its revised form, the theory no longer gives a substantive answer to the question 'What is truth?'. Why then did Brentano not simply reject the theory? One might suspect that this is evidence that Brentano did not really go as far as proposing a minimalist account of truth. In this section, I want to dispute this evidence by giving it a different significance. Brentano was aware that the correspondence theory may be adapted also to serve the purposes of an idealist world view. Attacking the correspondence theory would therefore not take him very far in defending his Aristotelian realism against such attempts, and it may even be counter-productive. That is, I submit, why Brentano may have stopped short of rejecting the correspondence theory outright.

Brentano never says that the correspondence theory is mistaken, but only that it needs to be "given an interpretation quite different from the one offered by those who think there is a relation of identity, or of sameness" (Brentano 1966, 20), or that it needs to be "amended" in the way proposed by the equivalence schema (in Szrednicki 1965, 127). Although Brentano explicitly says at one point "that this is all there is to the correspondence of true judgment and object about which we have heard so much" (Brentano 1966, 21), he seems to take this back when he makes a proposal for what appears to be a more substantive revision:

We have thus an exact analogue to the correspondence which holds between a true judgment and its object, or between a true judgment and the existence or non-existence of its object. And in this case we are not dealing with a being in the sense of that which may be said to be a *thing*. (Brentano 1966, 21–22)

It has been suggested that Brentano introduces in passages like these non-real entities as objects with which a true judgment may correspond (see Chrudzimski 2001, 60). However,

even if Brentano wavered in rejecting the correspondence theory, he could not accept such an “improvement” of the theory. This becomes clear when one considers his distaste for the idealism that Kant introduced into German philosophy.

For Brentano, the 1889 lecture on truth was a welcome opportunity to attack Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* and to scold contemporary neo-Kantians, notably Windelband, Sigwart and Dilthey, for perpetuating Kant’s mistakes. His main bone of contention with neo-Kantianism was of course Kant’s theory of synthetic a priori judgments, which Brentano dismisses as “blind prejudices” on which no serious theory of knowledge can be built (see Brentano 1925). But in his lecture on truth, it is another issue that looms large, namely Kant’s distinction between reality as it is in itself and reality as we know it from experience. Brentano confronts Kant’s transcendental idealism with Aristotelian realism that has no room for such a bifurcation among the totality of existing things. This is not to deny that this realism also posed severe problems for Brentano’s theory of intentionality, with which Brentano struggled throughout his career. It is a matter of dispute how often he changed his mind on this issue, but we know that Brentano eventually settled for the simplest possible view, called ‘reism’, according to which only real things exist and no division between different domains of being (or non-being) is accepted. In the 1889 lecture on truth, Brentano still allowed the existence of things that are not real. These non-realities are not *things* in the strict sense, but ‘pseudo-things’, as one might say, that figure as objects of thought. The list of such pseudo-things that Brentano discusses includes possibilities and impossibilities, the absence of things or properties, the objects of memory and of imagination, etc. To say that these are objects of thought means that we can present them in our minds, we can make judgments about their existence and we can take an emotional attitude towards them. But they do not exist independently of being presented, judged or evaluated. They come to exist and cease to exist together with the mental acts whose objects they are.

Brentano's arguments against Kant's transcendental conception of reality are too complex to discuss here in detail. (Different versions of his arguments against Kant can be found in lectures and manuscripts collected in Brentano 1925.) There is much more involved in these arguments than just the issue how realists should understand the concept of truth. But when one focusses on this question, one can abstract from Brentano's reasoning the following simple argument that comes close to a *reductio ad absurdum* of the view that nothing can be known about reality in itself:

1. Real things constitute reality as it is in itself.
2. Nothing can be known about reality as it is in itself. Therefore,
3. Reality as we know it consists of pseudo-things (mere objects of thought).

The conclusion of this argument is unacceptable for both Kant and Brentano. Kant can avoid this conclusion only by denying premise 1 of the argument. Does this also force him to give up the correspondence theory of truth? From an Aristotelian perspective this might seem to be an inevitable consequence, yet it is not, as Brentano recognizes. For it is a widely held misconception of Kant's position, as he explains, that Kant refuted the correspondence theory. In fact, he accepted it like all other "epoch-making thinkers" that Brentano mentions in his lecture, and he proves it by quoting from Kant's *Critique* (see 1966: 11). This nourishes the suspicion that Brentano regarded the correspondence theory as part of the problem that transcendental idealism creates. Instead of supporting Aristotelian realism, this theory could be actually used (or mis-used) against that position!

Brentano therefore was confronted with two problematic alternatives. If he retained the correspondence theory, he had to make sure that it does not support Kant's case against the Aristotelian conception of reality. But if he rejected the theory, he had to explain truth without relying on the assumption that every true judgment corresponds with a real thing in reality. How could this be done without being forced to accept Kant's transcendental theory of the objectivity of truth? Brentano's response to this dilemma was the deflationist move. A

deflated correspondence theory could not threaten his realism, while it might still suffice to ground the objectivity of truth.

Taking this to be Brentano's position may help us now to understand also other aspects of his criticism not only of Kant and the neo-Kantian movement, but also of positions that some of his own pupils found attractive, much to Brentano's dismay. In this case, the contentious question was how to explain the truth of negative existential judgments like the following:

(H) There are no humans with three legs.

What could a judgment like this correspond with? It could not correspond with a three-legged human being because there are no such beings. So, if truth implies correspondence, then one needs to find some other entity to stand in a correspondence relation with (H). Again, non-real things might seem to provide the solution:

CORR-H Judgment (H) is true because it corresponds with the non-existence of humans with three legs.

In Brentano's view, this proposal is just as absurd as Kant's view of reality, and for related reasons. Since existence is not a property, as Brentano agrees with Kant, the present proposal amounts to saying that a judgment can be true not because it corresponds with a real thing, but because it corresponds with a mere object of thought. This is just as unacceptable as saying that mere objects of thought are all we can ever know. But things get even worse if we consider someone who falsely judges that there are no tables with three legs. If one is making this judgment, there exists in one's mind the pseudo-thing 'the non-existence of a table with three legs'. Since this object exists just as much as the non-existence of humans with three legs, the latter judgment would come out *true* as well. Thus we seem to lose the distinction between true and false judgments.

For similar reasons, Brentano had no sympathy with views like that of Bolzano or Meinong, who defended the objectivity of truth by introducing mind-independent truth-

bearers. For Brentano, such a form of Realism merely covers up the fact that these entities are pseudo-things that exist only as long as one accepts them as theoretical posits. Brentano opted for a different approach with his deflationist account of truth. He argues that the objectivity of truth is secured by the law of non-contradiction, according to which true judgements cannot contradict other true judgements. In order to secure this law, nothing more than a deflationist account of truth is needed (see Szrednicki 1965, 135).<sup>5</sup>

Returning now to the quotation at the beginning of this section, we can see why it does not support the interpretation that Brentano early on still explained truth in terms of a correspondence relation, even if this required postulating non-real (pseudo-)things. When such things are postulated, Brentano says, we do not have a real case of correspondence but only an analogue of such a relation. Such analogies may be harmless unless they are used to undermine a realist world view. This happens not only in Kant's transcendental idealism, but also when non-real objects are postulated as entities that correspond with true negative existential judgments.

#### 4. SELF-EVIDENCE AND TRUTH

Charles Parsons notes in his discussion of Brentano's theory of judgment and truth:

If Brentano had stopped his account of truth with remarks [about the proper interpretation of the correspondence theory], he might count as an ancestor of what is nowadays called deflationism. But instead he continues and offers a characterization of truth in terms of evidence, that is in terms of evident judgment. (Parsons 2004, 188).

Parsons agrees here with the received view that in his later years Brentano held a theory of truth that must count as robust. It defines truth in epistemic terms. But is this really so clear as it seems? In this section I will offer another explanation why Brentano later emphasized the

connection between the concept of truth and the concept of self-evident judgment. This alternative explanation takes its inspiration from Brentano's opposition to Kant, and it is compatible with the assumption that Brentano remained a minimalist about truth even in his later years.

Brentano was a concept empiricist who believed that *all* our concepts are directly or indirectly derived from inner or outer experience. The self-evidence of certain judgments is the experiential source from which the concept of truth is derived. Whether or not one agrees with Brentano on this point, there is nothing in this position that would force him to *define* truth in terms of self-evidence, just as a concept empiricist need not define an empirical concept in terms of the experiences that prompt us to form this concept in the first place. The question 'What is truth?' is not the same as the question 'How do we acquire the concept of truth?'. .

Nothing here would seem to suggest that Brentano intended truth to be constrained by what can be known with self-evidence. And yet this is what he seems to suggest in later years in passages like the following:

Truth pertains to the judgment of the person who judges correctly – to the judgment of the person who judges about a thing in the way in which anyone whose judgments were self-evident would judge about the thing. (1966, 122)<sup>6</sup>

It is presumed that in putting forward this new idea, Brentano followed a similar line than those who take truth to consist in some form of coherence among our beliefs (see Krantz 1990/91, 85). In the same vein, Künne suggests that Brentano belongs to the tradition of alethic anti-realism, preparing the ground for pragmatist and verificationist theories of truth (see Künne 2003, 21). If Brentano was a deflationist about truth, these suggestions seem



misguided. Let us therefore see whether there is a better way to understand Brentano's idea that truth is primarily found in self-evident judgments.

The first thing to note here is that the term 'Evidenz', as Brentano uses it, applies only to a very limited class of cases. It is found only in judgments that are infallible or at least beyond any reasonable doubt.<sup>7</sup> As human beings we have an experience of self-evidence only when (a) we judge a general principle as true whose denial would involve a straightforward contradiction, or when (b) we form judgments on the basis of an inner perception or our own conscious experiences. In both categories, uncontroversial cases are hard to find. Which axiom would be completely beyond any reasonable doubt? In the case of judgments of inner perception, Brentano acknowledges the fact that inner perceptions are not always "clear and distinct", implying that the epistemic conditions for inner perception are not always equally good. When are these conditions good enough for making a judgment of inner perception that is beyond any reasonable doubt?<sup>8</sup>

These worries about how to identify clear cases of self-evident judgments need not concern us here, as long as one grants Brentano that such judgments exist. What we must consider now are the consequences of this assumption for his account of truth. When Brentano says (e.g., in Szrednicki 1965, 135) that truth is to be found primarily in self-evident judgment, and in a secondary sense in judgments that agree with self-evident ones in relevant respects, does he thereby place an epistemic constraint on the concept of truth? Suppose we have no way to find out whether a butterfly existed at a certain location at some earlier time. Then we also have no idea how a person would judge if he or she were to judge with self-evidence that some butterfly existed at this time at this location. The truth of this judgment may be unknowable to us, even if it agrees with someone else's self-evident judgment.

This still leaves open the question whether or not Brentano proposed this new idea as a new definition of truth that could replace the old view that truth consists in correspondence with reality. There are two considerations that speak against this interpretation. First, one

finds the idea that truth and self-evidence are closely related concepts already in Brentano's early lecture course on *Metaphysics*. Brentano there says that "alternatively, truth can also be determined as a knowing judgment" (MS 96, 112). This passage certainly does not warrant the conclusion that Brentano proposed an alternative *definition* of truth. It is much more plausible to take this remark as offering an alternative way of elucidating the concept of truth. We have already seen that Brentano regarded an elucidation by examples as the proper way to elucidate concepts that cannot be defined in more basic terms (see Szrednicki 1965, 132).

Secondly, it is not clear how Brentano could avoid a vicious circle when defining truth in terms of self-evidence. Consider implications of such a definition like the following:

- (C) The judgment that all butterflies have wings is true if and only if that judgment is self-evident or if it agrees with a self-evident judgment that denies the existence of butterflies with no wings.

One might agree that (C) is a conceptual truth that holds with necessity. But what explains the fact that (C) is necessarily true? Is it true because the judgment that all butterflies have wings is true if a person were to judge with self-evidence that this is so, or is it the other way round? Would a person judge that way if she judged with self-evidence because the judgment is true? From a realist point of view, the latter is the correct order of explanation. Things are not true because they would be judged a certain way, but they would be judged that way because they are true. Given Brentano's commitment to realism, this must also be his view. But then it becomes blatantly circular to define the concept of truth in terms of how a person would judge with self-evidence, if her way of judging depends on whether the judgment in question is true or false.

There is also no need to ascribe to Brentano a new definition of truth in terms of self-evidence. His concept empiricism suffices to explain why Brentano makes so much of the connection between truth and self-evidence. The explanation is that this is another respect in which Brentano disagrees with 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 then 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 procedure, we can see how Brentano applies concept empiricism also to the concept of truth. He starts from experiences of true judgements that provide us with a basis for constructing this concept. These experiences are self-evident judgements. Their self-evidence 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.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Defending concept empiricism is a formidable task, and one may doubt that Brentano's confidence in this project was justified. But while there is room for doubt here, I would like to emphasize in conclusion that it would not be a refutation of Brentano's theory of truth.

Brentano's commitment to concept empiricism is a distinctive feature of his epistemology that is separable from his work on truth. Hence, even if one thinks that Brentano's appeal to self-evidence as a source of our concept of truth was mistaken, his work on truth would still retain its value as an important contribution to the history of truth theories. The significance of Brentano's work on truth lies in the fact that he saw the virtues of a deflationist account of truth by reflecting on the doctrine of the *Adaequatio Rei et Intellectus*. Referring to this

doctrine he says in one of his late manuscripts: “And so we may stay with the old thesis, but we must resist the temptation to think of it as a profound truth from which we can draw a wealth of metaphysical consequences” (1966, 119).<sup>9</sup>

## REFERENCES

- Blackburn, Simon and Keith Simmons eds. 1999. *Truth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Brandl, Johannes 2014. “Brentano’s Theory of Judgment,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2014 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta:  
<<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/brentano-judgment/>
- . forthcoming. “Truth in Brentano”. *Routledge Handbook of Brentano and the Brentano School*, edited by Uriah Kriegel. London and New York: Routledge.
- Brentano, Franz 1925. *Versuch über die Erkenntnis*. Leipzig: Felix Meiner.
- Brentano, Franz 1966. *The True and the Evident*. Trans. R.M. Chisholm, I. Politzer, and K.R. Fischer. London: Routledge. German original published in 1930.
- Chrudzimski, Arkadiusz 2001. *Intentionalitätstheorie beim frühen Brentano*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Kamitz, Reinhard 1983. “Franz Brentano: Wahrheit und Evidenz,” *Grundprobleme der Großen Philosophen. Philosophie der Neuzeit III*, edited by Josef Speck, 160–97. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Kastil, Alfred 1934. “Ontologischer und gnoseologischer Wahrheitsbegriff.” *Zur Philosophie der Gegenwart*, 23–34. Prag: Brentano Gesellschaft.
- Krantz, Susan 1990/91. “Brentano’s Revision of the Correspondence Theory.” *Brentano Studien* 3: 79–87.
- Kraus, Oskar 1966. “Introduction.” *Franz Brentano: The True and the Evident*, edited by Oskar Kraus, xi–xxix. London: Routledge 1966.

- Künne, Wolfgang 2003. *Conceptions of Truth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Parsons, Charles 2004. "Brentano on Judgment and Truth." *The Cambridge Companion to Brentano*, edited by Dale Jacquette, 168–96: Cambridge University Press.
- Pasquarella, Lynn 1989. "Kotarbinski and Brentano on Truth." *Topoi Supplement 4: The Object and its Identity*: 98–106.
- Simons, Peter M. and Jan Wolenski. 1989. "De Veritate: Austro-Polish Contributions to the Theory of Truth from Brentano to Tarski." *The Vienna Circle and the Lvov-Warsaw School*, edited by Klemens Szaniawski: Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Stegmüller, Wolfgang 1969. *Main Currents in Contemporary German, British, and American Philosophy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Szrednicki, Jan 1965. *Franz Brentano's Analysis of Truth*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- van der Schaar, Maria 1999. "Evidence and the Law of Excluded Middle: Brentano on Truth." *The Logica Yearbook 1998*, edited by Timothy Childers: *Filosofia*.
- — — . 2003. "Brentano on Logic, Truth and Evidence." *Brentano Studien* 10: 119–50.
- Weingartner, Paul 1978. "Brentano's Criticism of the Correspondence Theory of Truth and the Principle 'Ens et Verum Convertuntur.'" *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 5: 183–195.
- Woleński, Jan 1989. "Brentano's Criticism of the Correspondence Conception of Truth and Tarski's Semantic Theory." *Topoi* 8, no. 2: 105–10.
- Wrenn, Chase 2015. *Truth*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

---

<sup>1</sup> This interpretation of Brentano goes back to O. Kraus and A. Kastil (see Kastil 1934, Kraus 1966). It has been accepted as authoritative, among others, by Szrednicki 1965, Stegmüller

---

1969, Kamitz 1983, Pasquarella 1989, Krantz 1990/91, Chrudzimski 2001, Künne 2003, Van der Schaar 1999, 2003, and Parsons 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Whether Tarski's semantic definition of truth is also deflationist, as Horwich claims, is a controversial question. In view of the fact that Tarski's work was at least indirectly influenced by Brentano, it would support a deflationist reading of Tarski if Brentano turns out to be an ancestor of deflationism. On this topic see Simons & Wolenski 1989, Wolenski 1989, and Pasquarella 1989.

<sup>3</sup> The 1889 lecture is the first text in a compilation of most, but not all of Brentano's writings on truth, edited by Oskar Kraus with the title *The True and the Evident (Wahrheit und Evidenz, 1930)*. Three of the relevant texts that are missing in Kraus's collection have been translated and published in Szrednicki 1965 as appendices B, C, D. Still unpublished is Brentano's Lecture on Metaphysics from the 1860s containing a chapter on truth entitled "Vom On Hos Alethes" (On Being in the Sense of Truth). Manuscript MS 96, 104–113.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> Brentano states the principle of non-contradiction here specifically for the domain of self-evident judgments, but he clearly intended it to hold for all true judgments, not only for self-evident ones.

---

<sup>6</sup> The translation of “evident” has been changed to “self-evident”.

<sup>7</sup> To say that self-evident judgments are beyond reasonable doubt is not intended to be a definition of ‘self-evidence’, because we already need the concept of self-evidence to understand what it means to be ‘beyond reasonable doubt’. According to Brentano, the concept ‘self-evidence’, like ‘truth’, is a simple concept that cannot be defined but only elucidated by examples. See Brentano 1966, 125.

<sup>8</sup> As Uriah Kriegel pointed out to me, Brentano allows that judgments of inner perception may be evident even when based on presentations that are not fully clear and distinct. How far this move helps resolving the present issue is not apparent however. It either implies that self-evident judgments may not be beyond any reasonable doubt, if they are made in less than ideal epistemic conditions, or it implies that a judgment may be beyond any reasonable doubt even when it is made in conditions that are not epistemically perfect. Both options seem difficult to defend for Brentano.

<sup>9</sup> I am grateful to Marcello Fiocco, Guillaume Frechette, Uriah Kriegel, and Edgar Morscher for their encouragement and helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. I also would like to thank the audiences at workshops on Brentano at King’s College, London, and the University of Salzburg for fruitful discussions of this material.