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Franz Brentano and Auguste Comte's positive philosophy

Franz Brentano's article "Auguste Comte and positive philosophy," published in the journal *Chilianeum* in 1869, marks a milestone in the philosophical reception of Comte in Germany. For, as Brentano reminds us in the beginning of that article, Comte's positive philosophy was little known at the time in Germany; the influence it exerted on German philosophy in the XIXth Century mainly came from England, where Comte's positivism was greeted with a favorable reception by philosophers such as John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer, two philosophers to whom Brentano felt very close. Addressing the readers of the Catholic journal *Chilianeum*, Brentano, who was then a young Catholic priest educated in the pure scholastic tradition, and the author of two works on Aristotle², justifies his choice of theme by saying of Comte that "there is perhaps no other contemporary philosophy so deserving of our attention," because he "was without a doubt one of the most remarkable and praiseworthy thinkers of our century."³

¹ An earlier version of this article has been published in *Les cahiers philosophiques de Strasbourg* (2014). I thank Maxwell Ramstead who translated an earlier version of this paper, Hamid Taieb, Ion Tanacescu, and Guillaume Fréchette for their comments, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its financial support.

² F. Brentano, *Von Der Mannigfachen Bedeutung des Seienden Nach Aristoteles*, Freiburg: Herder, 1862; *On the Several Senses of Being in Aristotle*, transl. Rolf George, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975; *Die Psychologie des Aristoteles, insbesondere seine Lehre vom Nous Poietikos. Nebst einer Beilage über das Wirken des Aristotelischen Gottes*, Mainz: Franz Kirchheim, 1867.

³ F. Brentano, "Auguste Comte und die positive Philosophie," p. 99. Compare with Brentano's evaluation of Comte in his 1876 paper „Der neueste philosophische Versuch

What could Brentano have seen in the French philosopher that would merit such praise? Not only did Brentano hold him in high esteem, but he also grants him much importance in the Würzburg period (1866-1874). Indeed, Brentano held a series of public lectures on Comte in 1869 (*Auguste Comte und der Positivismus im heutigen Frankreich*),⁴ and it is known that his article “Auguste Comte and positive philosophy” was originally intended to be only the first in a much vaster project, which was intended to culminate in the publication of a series of studies on Comte’s philosophy. This is confirmed in Brentano’s application for the title of Full Professor at the University of Würzburg, written in 1870:

“Last year, I set about critically presenting and clarifying the positive philosophy of the most remarkable French thinker in modern philosophy, Auguste Comte, in a series of articles intended for the journal *Chilianeum*. These articles should be the subject of a full publication, based on the public

in Frankreich“ (p. 4): „Das Volk, welches in Descartes der modernen Speculation den ersten Anstoß gegeben, schien lange Zeit wie durch eine Frühgeburt erschöpft. Die Niederlande, England, Deutschland führten in Spinoza, Locke, Leibnitz und ihren Nachfolgern die Philosophie zu weiterer Entwicklung; Frankreich sah müßig zu oder spielte nur mit den Ideen, die es dem Auslande entlehnte, mannichfach combinirte und mit rednerischem Schmucke umkleidete. Aber unmöglich konnte eine begabte Nation, die in allen anderen Fragen für Europa den Ton anzugeben liebt, sich auf dem höchsten Gebiete für immer mit einer so bescheidenen Rolle begnügen. Und so ist in der That in neuester Zeit in A. Comte ein Denker aufgetreten, dem weder der begeisterte Eifer für die erhabensten Fragen, noch auch die scharfsinnige Kraft zur Verkettung der Ideen fehlte, welche den wahrhaft großen Philosophen über die Masse niedriger Geister emporheben. Mill scheut sich nicht, ihn Descartes und Leibnitz an die Seite zu stellen, ja er nennt ihn diesen überlegen, „wenn nicht“, sagt er, „innerlich, zum mindesten darum, weil es ihm vergönnt war, über eine gleiche geistige Kraft in einer vorgeschrittenen Cultur-Epoche zu verfügen.“ Immerhin ward auch Comte zu seinen Lebzeiten wenig beachtet. Für seine Landsleute war sein barbarischer und, wie sie sich ausdrückten, „deutscher“ Styl ein Hinderniß, das nur Wenige (z. B. Littré) zu überwinden wussten. „Der Styl ist der Mensch“, das hat in Frankreich seine volle praktische Wahrheit. Bei anderen Völkern wirkten theils die Vorurtheile, die sich mehr und mehr gegen die französische Philosophie im Allgemeinen gebildet hatten, theils Extravaganzen von Comte’s späteren Speculationen seinem Erfolge entgegen. Dennoch hat zuletzt seine Lehre, besonders in England, zahlreiche Anhänger gewonnen.“

⁴ F. Brentano, „Auguste Comte und die positive Philosophie“, *Geschichte der Philosophie der Neuzeit*, Hedwig, K. (ed.) Hamburg: Meiner, 1987, p. 246-294.

lectures I gave during the summer semester (1869) on the same topic. The first article was published in the July 1869 edition.⁵

Brentano never put his plan into motion, but the sketch of this project—
 5 ambitious to say the least—has come to our knowledge, and contains the plans for the other articles Brentano intended to write.⁶ Three of these articles were to focus on Comte's sociology, and another was to take as theme ethics and religion. In addition to the public lectures from 1869 on Comte's philosophy, Brentano's *Nachlaß* contains other manuscripts, written during
 10 different periods of his life, in which he takes on some of the themes of this project.⁷ Brentano's interest in Comte's philosophy is thus not limited to his 1869 article.

15 ⁵ F. Brentano, 'Gesuch an das Staatsministerium d. Inn. f. Kirchen u. Schul-Angelegenheiten um Ernennung zum a. o. Professor, 26. Juni 1870', in Freudenberger, Theobald, *Die Universität Würzburg und das erste vatikanische Konzil, 1. Teil : Würzburger Professoren und Dozenten als Mitarbeiter und Gutachter vor Beginn des Konzils*, Neustadt an der Aisch: Degener, 1969, p. 455.

20 ⁶ This plan is reproduced in J. Werle's work, *Franz Brentano und die Zukunft der Philosophie*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1989, vol. XV, p. 37:

1. Nature of positive science (philosophy);
2. The current situation of positive philosophy;
3. The meaning of positive philosophy (plan of the work: hierarchy of the sciences)
4. Characterization of the first essay to found sociology
 - 4.1. What sociology has been up to now
 - 4.2. The method of sociology
- 25 5. Characterization of the first essay to found sociology (continued)
 - 5.1. The static character of sociology
 - 5.2. Social dynamics / way of addressing history (abstraction, parallels)
- 30 6. Characterization of the first essay to found sociology (continued)
 - 6.1. The theological stage
 - 6.2. The metaphysical stage
 - 6.3. Proposals for the future
7. Comte's second career (first part): General remarks on ethics and religion in Comte
8. Comte's second career (second part): Details

35 ⁷ In his edition of *Geschichte der Philosophie der Neuzeit*, Hamburg: Meiner, 1987, p. XXIX-XXX, K. Hedwig indicates a few works by Comte that Brentano had in his possession: *Catéchisme positiviste* (Paris, 1852); *Positive Philosophy*, H. Martineau (trans.), 2 vols., London: J. Chapman, 1853; *Cours de philosophie positive*, 6 vols., Paris: G. Baillière, 1864.

Why is it, then, that he did not follow up on his project on Comte's philosophy? In his application for promotion addressed to the Minister, Brentano explains himself by recounting that the journal *Chilianeum* ceased its publishing activities shortly after the publication of his article in 1869.⁸ But this explanation is not convincing, because Brentano's interests in the publication project were not contingent solely on the existence of that journal. The abandonment of the project stems perhaps more from the difficulties Brentano encountered in the study of Comte's philosophy, notably with regard to the question of religion and theism in general.⁹ A letter to J. S. Mill dated February 15 1872¹⁰, which we will examine later, provides an explanation that fits better with Brentano's sustained interest in Comte and for British empiricism during the entire Würzburg period. Brentano confides in Mill that it was "the immaturity of his new positions (*Anschaunungen*)" that compelled him to abandon the project.¹¹ But it is precisely these "new positions," which he elaborated during the Würzburg period, that constitute the starting point for the philosophical program developed in his *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*,¹² and we shall see that this work bears the mark of his research on Comte's philosophy.

My aim in this study is to show that the philosophical program elaborated by Brentano in his *Psychology* is largely indebted to the research conducted by Brentano on British empiricism and Comte's positive philosophy at Würzburg. This research represents the starting point of, and backdrop to, the project for philosophy as science, which is at the heart of his *Psychology*, and sheds new light on the philosophical stakes of many debates he leads in that work. Furthermore, Brentano's research informs us about his philo-

⁸ F. Brentano, "Gesuch ...", in T. Freudenberger, *Die Universität Würzburg ...*, p. 455.

⁹ Cf. J. Werle, *Franz Brentano und die Zukunft der Philosophie*, p. 39.

¹⁰ Brentano's letters to Mill have not yet been published. I am here referring to handwritten letters bearing the signature K.1.34.1 and K.1.34.2, which can be consulted at the Brentano Archives in Graz.

¹¹ J. S. Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill. The Later Letters of John Stuart Mill, 1849-1873*, Francis E. Mineka and Dwight N. Lindley (eds.), Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972, vol. XVII, part IV.

¹² F. Brentano, *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkte (1874)*, Mauro Antonelli (ed.), *Schriften I*, 1, Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2008); *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, Antos C. Rancurello, transl. D. B. Terrell, and Linda L. McAlister (trans.), Oskar Kraus, and Linda L. McAlister (eds.) London and New York: Routledge, 2009, hereafter cited as *Psychology*.

sophical preoccupations during the Würzburg period, and simultaneously provide us with a new perspective on the evolution of his thought from his habilitation at Würzburg in 1866 to his arrival in Vienna in 1874. In this study, I propose to examine some of the factors that motivated Brentano's
 5 interest in Comte's philosophy and to evaluate the influence that the latter exerted on Brentano's thought during the Würzburg period and beyond.

1. The Würzburg period and Brentano's interest 10 in Comte's philosophy¹³

It is generally agreed that it is J. Stuart Mill's work *Auguste Comte and Posi-*
*tivism*¹⁴ that attracted Brentano's attention to Comte's philosophy. This is
 confirmed in a letter from Brentano to Mill from February 1872. In this
 15 letter, Brentano acknowledges his debt to Mill's scientific work, and thanks him for directing his attention on several British philosophers and on the work of Comte, rekindling his hope in philosophy in the process.¹⁵ De-
 spite the fact that his reading of Comte in his article is largely inspired by
 Mill's excellent work on Comte, this factor is not the only one explaining
 20 Brentano's marked interest in the French positivist's philosophy during the Würzburg period. Many themes discussed by Brentano in his article on Comte were already at the heart of his philosophical preoccupations when he assumes his position at Würzburg in 1866. Here, I especially have in
 mind his philosophy of history, his urging the employment of the methods
 25 of the natural sciences in philosophy, and his critique of speculative philosophy. Besides these three themes common to Brentano and Comte, other factors should also be considered in this context, such as Brentano's marked interest in British empiricism, the theme of a classification of the sciences

30 ¹³ The two main sources I will employ in this section are: D. Fisette and G. Fréchette, 'Le legs de Brentano', in *À l'école de Brentano. De Würzburg à Vienne*, Paris: Vrin, 2007, p. 7-161; C. Stumpf, 'Reminiscences of Franz Brentano', L. L. McAlister (trans.), in L. L. McAlister (ed.), *The Philosophy of Franz Brentano*, London: Duckworth, 1976, p. 10-46.

¹⁴ J. S. Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, 1865, in J. S. Mill, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, J. M. Robson (ed.) Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969, vol. X, p. 261-368.

35 ¹⁵ My conjecture is that Brentano is referring to his article on Comte in this letter, even if Mill does not refer to it in his response from 04-03-1872. Mill acknowledges receipt of Brentano's two works on Aristotle in letters from 29-04-1872 (*The Psychology of Aristotle*) and from 14-10-1872 (*On the Several Senses of Being in Aristotle*).

that took on increasing importance for Brentano during this period, and the question of religion, more specifically the question of the compatibility of philosophy practised in the spirit of the natural sciences with one form or another of theism. I will briefly comment on each of these points in the present section, and I will examine Brentano's article on Comte in the following one. 5

In the middle of summer 1866, Brentano presents twenty-five theses for his habilitation at the University of Würzburg, which he defends brilliantly in front of a large audience. One of his most prestigious students, who was present during this *disputatio*, briefly describes it in his memoirs to Brentano: 10

"The notice about Brentano's disputation enticed me and my elder brother to attend the battle of wits. Brentano had submitted no less than twenty-five Latin theses covering the whole range of philosophy, which were, however, to be argued in German. Hoffmann and Urlichs opposed him, and perhaps some others as well. The way in which Brentano defended and explicated his theses revealed him to be so superior to his attackers that I decided then and there to attend his lectures in the autumn. Behind each of these theses was a thoroughly thought-out theory; this became clear in part during the disputation and in part later on in his lectures. We were especially happy that the method he claimed for philosophy was none other than that of the natural sciences, and that he based his hopes for a rebirth of philosophy on this method. It was a new, incomparably deeper and more serious way of understanding philosophy."¹⁶ 15 20 25

Here, Stumpf especially has in mind the fourth habilitation thesis, which Brentano formulates as follows: "The genuine philosophical method is none other than that of the natural sciences."¹⁷ The importance of this thesis for Brentano's philosophy is clearly borne out in his text on Comte, in which he emphasizes the importance of employing the inductive method in philosophical research. However, this fourth thesis is not to be understood in the sense of physicalism, as the position later espoused by the members 30

¹⁶ C. Stumpf, 'Reminiscences of Franz Brentano', p. 11.

¹⁷ F. Brentano, 'Die Habilitationsthesen', in O. Kraus (ed.), *Über die Zukunft der Philosophie: nebst den Vorträgen, Über die Gründe der Entmutigung auf philosophischem Gebiet, Über Schellings System, und den 25 Habilitationsthesen*, Hamburg: Meiner, 1929, p. 137. 35

of the Vienna Circle¹⁸; rather, Stumpf explains, it should be understood more precisely as the expression of Brentano's conviction

“... that philosophy could not hope to benefit from an unbroken life but on the foundation of experience. Naturally, he did not mean by this that the only foundation of philosophy ought to be the domain of facts of the natural sciences. Rather, he granted an absolutely central significance to internal or psychological experience. His aim was only to transpose, in this way, the general character of the inductive method, as it had been practiced up to now in the most abundant and exemplary fashion, to philosophy. This programme was also the one which, first and foremost, rallied to him so many of his enthusiastic followers.”¹⁹

Besides Stumpf himself, who is considered Brentano's first student²⁰, Brentano's classes at Würzburg were attended by such widely known philosophers as his disciple Anton Marty, his cousin Georg von Hertling, Herman Schell, Ernst Commer, and Heinrich Denifle, just to name a few.²¹

Another thesis that Brentano defended in his *disputatio* is of considerable interest in the present context with regard to Comte's critique of the metaphysical stage in the development of the history of philosophy and of the mode of explanation adopted by metaphysical philosophy.²² This is the first of his habilitation theses, which Brentano states as follows: “Philosophy must protest the division of sciences between the speculative and the exact; and its right to protest is its right to its very existence”²³ Here,

¹⁸ R. Haller, ‘Franz Brentano, ein Philosoph des Empirismus’, *Brentano Studien*, vol. 1, 1988, p. 19-30. Haller insists especially on two other aspects of Brentano's work in this period that make it close to Comte's philosophy, namely his fourth habilitation thesis and his philosophy of history.

¹⁹ C. Stumpf, ‘Franz Brentano, Professor der Philosophie, 1838-1917’, in A. Chroust *et al.* (eds.), *Lebensläufe aus Franken*, Würzburg: Kabitzsch & Monnich, 1922, vol. II, p. 70.

²⁰ Cf. D. Fisette (ed.), *Carl Stumpf. Renaissance de la philosophie*, Paris: Vrin, 2007; D. Fisette & R. Martinelli (eds) *Philosophy from an empirical standpoint: Essays on Carl Stumpf*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2015.

²¹ Cf. F. Brentano, ‘Gesuch ...’, in T. Freudenberger, *Die Universität Würzburg ...*, p. 454-455.

²² Cf. L. Gilson, *Méthode et métaphysique selon Franz Brentano*, Paris: Vrin, 1955, p. 416.

²³ F. Brentano, ‘Die Habilitationsthesen’, in O. Kraus (ed.), *Über die Zukunft der Philosophie ...*, p. 137.

Brentano has in mind Hegel, and especially Schelling. Brentano attributes authorship for this distinction between two kinds of science to Schelling, and it is to him that he addresses the reproach of grossly abusing of the term “science” when speaking of so-called speculative science.²⁴ We know Schelling had taught at the University of Würzburg at the very beginning of the XIXth Century; and one of Schelling’s disciples, the famous Franz Hoffmann that Stumpf often mentions in his reminiscences, held a position at Würzburg and was on Brentano’s jury. We understand, then, why Hoffmann, Brentano’s enemy, imposes upon him for his habilitation lecture (*Probenvortrag*) the theme: “On the main steps in the development of the philosophy of Schelling and on the scientific value of the last phase of his philosophy.” Brentano gladly takes up the challenge, and in July 1866 delivers his habilitation lecture, in which he confronts Schelling’s speculative philosophy.²⁵

A third crucial factor concerns his theory of the four phases in the history of philosophy, which is close in many respects to Comte’s law of the three states (*états*), to which Brentano subscribes in his article on Comte.²⁶ The origin of Brentano’s philosophy of history can be traced to his reflections on the great speculative systems at the beginning of the 1860s, as his student Stumpf confirms once more in his memoirs:

“The first time Brentano was struck by this idea, as he later told me, was during his convalescence from a serious illness (Easter 1860). Having almost lost his faith in philosophy, he thought for a long time about the significance of the Systems of speculative philosophy which make such high claims, and which are at times so widely admired and then again wholly rejected. Then he was struck by the illuminating and saving idea of an analogy in the course of philosophical development within each of the three main periods (which he naturally did not consider valid for all time).”²⁷

²⁴ F. Brentano, *Deskriptive Psychologie*, R. Chisholm and W. Baumgartner (eds.) Hamburg: Meiner, 1982, p. 3.

²⁵ F. Brentano, ‘Über Schellings Philosophie’, in O. Kraus (ed.) *Über die Zukunft der Philosophie ...*, Hamburg: Meiner, 1929, p. 101-132.

²⁶ F. Brentano, “Auguste Comte und die positive Philosophie,” p. 105.

²⁷ C. Stumpf, “Reminiscences of Franz Brentano”, p. 11.

In 1867, Brentano publicly exposes his theory of the four phases in his contribution to Moehler's work *History of the Church*, to which he refers in his article on Comte.²⁸ We will see that Brentano's philosophy of history is in principle compatible with Comte's theory of the three states.

²⁸ F. Brentano, „Geschichte der kirchlichen Wissenschaften“, in J. A. Mohler, *Kirchengeschichte*, P. Gams (ed.), Regensburg: Georg Joseph Manz, 1867, vol. II, p. 526-584. In a passage of this work, widely known thanks to the critical study by Étienne Gilson (‘Franz Brentano’s interpretation of mediaeval philosophy, *Mediaeval Studies*, vol. 1, 1939, p. 1-10), Brentano briefly describes his theory of the four phases: “With Saint Thomas, the greatest philosopher of the Middle Ages, theology reaches its peak, but it declines as soon as philosophy becomes decadent. This decadence, which has its source in the obfuscation and diminishment of the scientific spirit, spans three periods, as we can see in the two other great philosophical periods: science, as it ceases to be scientific, beckons scepticism; scepticism, unable to satisfy the needs of man, leads to a reaction aiming to swiftly and immediately attain intellectual summits and enjoy its success without having gone through the long and tiresome labors of research, observation, and analysis. Hence, in Antiquity, after Aristotle, we witness the Stoics and the Epicureans desperately persisting in the exclusive pursuit of practical interests; and then come the sceptics, who impose their views even on the eclectics, such as Cicero; and then, neo-Platonic mysticism, which trashes about in the world of the intelligible. In Modern times, after Locke and Leibniz, we witness in marvellously rapid succession the superficial French civilisation, and the Germans, critical philosophy, and, in reaction, the theory of identity, the pantheistic mysticism of Schelling, and the absolute idealism of Hegel. The same phenomenon breaks out in the Middle Ages: as soon as the jealousy and ergotism of the schools replaced the disinterested research of science, philosophy declines. Against the inadequate dogmatism of the schools, nominalism reacts with a palpably sceptical style, which then itself provokes a bold and largely mystical reaction to excess, as attest in various forms Raymond de Sebond, Nicolas de Cues and the followers of Raymond Lulle, whose work we are only beginning to acknowledge. The main consequence of this movement was to divert from research the great intellects, who lock themselves up in the sanctuary of a truly religious mystique, to indulge in the pleasure of the supreme beauty of the intelligible. This feature, which advantageously distinguishes the later period of the Middle Ages from analogous periods of decadence, stems from the overabundance of faith in a time that had not yet lost its unity, and that was profoundly imbued with the Christian spirit.” F. Brentano, « Histoire des sciences ecclésiastiques », *op. cit.*, p. 479-480.

In his critical study, É. Gilson examines this passage in relation to Brentano's theory of the four phases. He essentially criticizes him for simplifying excessively! He also notes with regard to Comte: “As can be seen from his criticism of Comte, Brentano himself never conceived the four phases of philosophy as the concrete expression of some necessary law. Far from thinking that philosophy is bound to begin as a pure speculation and then to degenerate into moralism,

But the most determining factor explaining why Brentano took interest in Comte's philosophy is without a doubt the importance he granted to British empiricism, and especially to the philosophy of J. Stuart Mill. As we indicated, it was through Mill's work on Comte's positivism that Brentano came to know about the work of the French philosopher, and his reading of Comte had been influenced by the Mill's interpretation of him in that work. But there is reason to suggest that Mill's position with regard to Comte's positivism in that work is also for Brentano a non-negligible motivation for his interest in Mill's philosophy. One of the important sources of information on Brentano's effort to bring himself closer to the British empiricists is his correspondence with Mill from 1872 to the latter's death in 1873.

2. Brentano's article on Comte

Let us now turn to Brentano's article on Comte. A few preliminary remarks on the meaning and objectives pursued by Brentano in that article are in order. To understand the meaning of the article, we ought to keep in mind the accusations raised against Brentano in 1869, and take into account the readership of the Catholic journal in which the article on Comte was published. For the young Brentano, what is at stake is to convince his audience of the viability of positive philosophy, and to show that it represents no threat to theism. This is at least partly what explains Brentano's accommodating attitude toward Comte's positivism, even where he held positions markedly different from his own on religion, metaphysics, and psychology, the two latter topics being the two main axes of Brentano's philosophy. Secondly, the value of Brentano's article rests perhaps less in the originality of its interpretation of Comte—Brentano, as we indicated, largely rests his own on the one proposed by Mill in his work on Comte—or again in his analyses of Comte's philosophy, because this article, the first of a series of seven that he

scepticism and mysticism, he felt convinced that his discovery of the four phases would inspire philosophers with a deeper respect for the essentially speculative character of philosophy. This being granted, there nevertheless remains to be seen if the temporal meaning that is inseparable from the word *phase* is not somewhat misleading in the present occasion" ("Franz Brentano's interpretation of mediaeval philosophy", p. 8).

intended to write on Comte, aimed explicitly at being a general introduction to Comte's philosophy. Brentano mainly relied on the first lecture of Comte's *Course in Positive Philosophy*, large excerpts of which he reproduces in paraphrase, despite also occasionally referring to his later work, *System of Positive Polity*. In the context of the present study, the value of this article rests more in its position with regard to Comte's philosophy and the information it provides on the genesis of Brentano's thought during the Würzburg period. I will here concern myself with summarizing the main lines of argument in this article, emphasizing the elements relevant to the evolution of Brentano's thought during the period to which this article belongs. I will insist especially on his critical commentary on the nature of Comte's positive philosophy, his theory of the three states, his classification of the sciences, and a few questions of methodological nature. I will also take into account his public lectures from 1869, which provide complementary information on a few important points.

2.1. The nature of positive philosophy

Let us start from the passage in the *Course* in which Comte proposes a general definition of positive philosophy, a passage that Brentano comments at the very beginning of his study:

"I employ the word 'philosophy' in the Ancients' sense, and especially in Aristotle's sense, as designating the general system of human conceptions; and, by adding the word 'positive', I announce my consideration for that special manner of philosophizing, which consists in viewing theories, in any domain of ideas at all, as having as their object the coordination of observed facts."²⁹

Brentano comments the first part of the definition by insisting on the reference to Aristotle who, in effect, understands the general system of human knowledge as "a first philosophy that contains the most general laws applying equally to all domains of phenomena, and which must precede the

²⁹ A. Comte cited by F. Brentano in his article: "Auguste Comte und die positive Philosophie," p. 103.

study of particular sciences.”³⁰ However, because Aristotle also uses the term “metaphysical” to designate first philosophy and the “science of being in general,” Comte’s use of the notion of metaphysics in his theory of the three states, to designate the mode of explanation of phenomena based on “abstract forces” or on fictional entities, leads to some confusion. This is because what Comte contests in his critique of metaphysics is above all the mode of explanation of phenomena having recourse to so-called fictional entities, rather than metaphysics *per se*, that is, metaphysics understood as first philosophy and as the system of human knowledge. This being said, Brentano entirely endorses Comte’s position on metaphysics, when understood in this twofold way.

Another important aspect of Comte’s definition of philosophy rests on the notion of positivity. Brentano seems to agree with Mill’s suggestion that the adjective “positive” in the expression “positive philosophy,” “would be less ambiguously expressed in the objective aspect by Phenomenal, in the subjective by Experiential”³¹. This remark by Mill brings to the fore two characteristic traits of positive philosophy, which Brentano insists upon in his article, to wit: that it is a philosophy aiming to found itself on experience, that is, on observation and induction, and that it ultimately only concerns itself with phenomena, and more specifically with the succession and similarity between phenomena, which it submits to natural and invariant laws. Furthermore, it implies the rejection of research into ultimate causes by which Comte characterizes the mode of explanation of phenomena by theistic and metaphysical philosophy in his theory of the three states. In this respect, the notion of phenomenon as used by Comte is especially important to Brentano with regard to its central role in his *Psychology*, where it designates at once the object of psychology (mental phenomena) and that of the natural sciences (physical phenomena). Brentano relates Comte’s use of phenomena in his philosophy to what he calls, in his article “Atheism and science,” the relativity of knowledge, by which he means both a limitation

³⁰ F. Brentano, “Auguste Comte und die positive Philosophie,” p. 103.

³¹ J. S. Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, p. 10-11. In a fragment bearing the title “Vom Gesetz der geschichtlichen Entwicklung”, drawn from one of Brentano’s lectures on the history of philosophy, and published by K. Hedwig in his edition of *Geschichte der Philosophie der Neuzeit* (p. 95 ff.), Brentano alludes to this suggestion by Mill to replace the expression “positive” by those of subjective experience and phenomenal object, which he had not done in the article (*cf.* p. 96).

of our knowledge of transcendent things and the relational character of our knowledge. A passage from Mill's work on Comte summarizes this point perfectly:

5 "We have no knowledge of anything but Phaenomena; and our knowl-
 edge of phaenomena is relative, not absolute. We know not the essence,
 nor the real mode of production, of any fact, but only its relations to other
 facts in the way of succession or of similitude. These relations are con-
 10 stant; that is, always the same in the same circumstances. The constant re-
 semblances which link phaenomena together, and the constant sequences
 which unite them as antecedent and consequent, are termed their laws.
 The laws of phaenomena are all we know respecting them. Their essential
 nature, and their ultimate causes, either efficient or final, are unknown
 and inscrutable to us."³²

15 According to Brentano, the thesis of the relativity of knowledge does not
 for Comte entail a mere rejection of causes, as is the case in Hume, or later
 in Mach, for instance, and even less so a form of scepticism (in the style
 of Hume), because, as he explains, Comte does not deny the existence of
 20 causes, but rather only of our capacity to know them.³³ What he rejects, in
 the end, is only the mode of explanation of phenomena having recourse to
 occult properties or obscure causes. Our knowledge is limited to seeking
 relations between things, more specifically relations of succession and re-
 semblance that link phenomena among themselves, and the main task of sci-
 25 ence consists in formulating the general laws that govern these relations. For
 instance, when we seek to explain why one body attracts another, we are not
 seeking an occult property belonging to the ultimate nature of attraction,
 but rather we relate phenomena using a law, in this case the law of gravita-
 30 tion.³⁴ From Brentano's remarks on the definition of positive philosophy,
 we should retain his insistence on relations, and the importance he grants
 to the relativity thesis and to the mode of explanation, based on observation
 and induction, which consists on the one hand in seeking relations of suc-

35 ³² J. S. Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, p. 6.

³³ F. Brentano, "Auguste Comte und die positive Philosophie," p. 116.

³⁴ F. Brentano, *op. cit.*, pp. 116-117.

cession and similarity that link phenomena the ones to the others, and on the other hand in seeking the general laws that govern these relations.

2.2. Comte's theory of the three stages

The pages that Brentano devotes to Comte's theory of the three states show that he agrees for the most part with the general principles of Comte's theory³⁵, which, with a few modifications, is compatible with his own philosophy of history. Brentano's theory starts from the observation that there exist certain regularities in the course of the history of philosophy and that we can observe, in each of the three great periods of its history, four phases or moments, the first being ascendant and the three followings ones showing signs of decline "in the obfuscation and diminishment of the scientific spirit." Two of the important criteria guiding this philosophy of history are the primacy of theoretical interests over practical interests, and the scientific method as understood in his fourth habilitation thesis. It is from this perspective that Brentano criticises Comte for his equivocal vocabulary, his linear and unilateral theoretical conception of the development of history, his prejudices with regard to ancient and medieval philosophy, and finally for not taking into consideration degenerative phases in the history of philosophy. Let us once again start from a passage of the *Course* in which Comte maintains that the development of the human intelligence and of history is determined by a necessary and invariant law:

"From the study of the development of human intelligence, in all directions, and through all times, the discovery arises of a great fundamental law, to which it is necessarily subject, find which has a solid foundation of proof, both in the acts of our organization and in our historical experience. The law is this:—that each of our leading conceptions,—each branch of our knowledge,—passes successively through three different theoretical conditions: the *Theological*, or *fictitious*; the *Metaphysical*, or *abstract*; and the *Scientific*, or *positive*."³⁶

³⁵ F. Brentano, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

³⁶ A. Comte cited by F. Brentano in "Auguste Comte und die positive Philosophie", p. 103-104.

When applied to the history of philosophy, this law entails a succession of three phases or stages in the evolution of philosophy, which correspond to the three great periods of the history of philosophy, to wit: Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and Modernity. Comte holds that to these three phases
 5 corresponds three types of philosophy: theological philosophy, metaphysical philosophy, and scientific philosophy, which are characterized by three methods or interpretations that Comte qualified respectively as the fictive, the abstract, and the positive.

As we have already noted, Brentano criticises Comte for his equivocal
 10 use of the terms “metaphysics” and “theology,” and he opposes the idea that to each of these stages corresponds a distinct method. Brentano argues that theological philosophy and metaphysical philosophy in Comte’s sense are also theories which, even in ancient periods of history, sometimes use the same method as positive philosophy, that is, observation and induction. We
 15 can already see examples of this in Ionian philosophy of nature, and later in Bacon.³⁷ Instead, what distinguishes each of the three stages is the kind of reasons invoked in the explanation of phenomena. Brentano takes up a suggestion by Mill³⁸ to distinguish three modes of explanation:

- 20 1. The mode of explanation having recourse to fictional persons (characters of Greek mythology)
2. The mode of explanation having recourse to fictional entities (essences in things)
- 25 3. The mode of explanation having recourse to natural laws (Newton’s law of gravitation)

Stated briefly, hylozoism or what Brentano calls universal fetishism designates the first mode of explanation of phenomena by theological philosophy, and it is characterized by having recourse to fictional persons (for
 30 instance, the characters of Greek mythology). Metaphysical or speculative philosophy has recourse to fictional entities (such as the *virtus dormitiva* of opium, to use an example from Molière), whereas scientific and positive philosophy prefers explanations founded on laws of nature (for instance, Newton’s law of gravitation).

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³⁷ F. Brentano, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

³⁸ J. S. Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, p. 10-11.

Brentano also criticises Comte for his linearity of his theory of the three stages, which he applies to the progress of the human intelligence over the course of the three great periods of philosophy. Brentano's theory has a more cyclical character, as it applies also to each of the three great traditions in the history of philosophy. Thus, ancient philosophy, like medieval philosophy, necessarily goes through a theological stage and a metaphysical stage, to use Comte's vocabulary, before culminating in a positive phase, which characterizes the philosophy of Aristotle in Antiquity, as well as Thomas Aquinas' in the Middle Ages. Hence the other reproach directed to Comte, of his prejudice against the use of the scientific method in Antiquity³⁹ and in the Middle Ages, periods which in his perspective remain backwards with respect to the positive stage.⁴⁰ Another critique he addresses to the theory of the three states also stems from the cyclical character of his own philosophy of history, and consists in the fact that Comte only takes into account the ascendant phase in the progression of the human intelligence, thus neglecting the degenerative phases "which divert philosophy from the positive spirit"⁴¹. In the following passage, which I draw once again from the end of his article on Comte, Brentano clearly shows how his philosophy of history escapes the criticism that he addresses to the theory of the three stages:

"Up until him [Aristotle], there is an order similar to the one Comte determines in a general manner. Consequently, we should have expected a refinement and more perfect development of the positive spirit. Yet Greek philosophy was to be dragged along with the general decline of Greek life; we witness the Stoa, the most important philosophical school of the time, return to Heraclitus' hylozoism, and see Neo-Platonism institute the most fantasist of theosophical systems, as if the first stage of development had

³⁹ F. Brentano, „Die vier Phasen der Philosophie und ihr augenblicklicher Stand“, *Die vier Phasen der Philosophie und ihr augenblicklicher Stand*, Stuttgart: Cotta, 1895, p. 10.

⁴⁰ Cf., on this issue, the passages on Littré (his preface to the second edition of Comte's *Course*) and Mill (his review of Grote's work on Aristotle) in Brentano's article 'Atheismus und Wissenschaft' (p. 920-922), where Comte's prejudices against Antiquity and the Middle Ages are discussed.

⁴¹ F. Brentano, "Auguste Comte und die positive Philosophie," p. 132. Brentano adds in a note that this decline also bears witness to "a constant historical law that knows of no psychological justification" (p. 132).

just begun at that moment. The scholastics of the eleventh and thirteenth Centuries renew the ascendant phase of the past. Yet new troubles lead positive research back into metaphysical subtleties and mysticism. Modernity is witness to a development through the work of Bacon, Descartes, Locke, and Leibniz, but then, for the third time, a complete degeneration diverts philosophy from the positive spirit, in such a manner that its degeneration into Schellingian and Hegelian pantheisms, it seems to us, far exceeds the productions of all analogous stages of corrupt philosophy in Antiquity and the Middle Ages. It is the task of our times to turn anew to a positivist attitude to philosophy. This task of returning to the positive spirit has largely been recognized, and we can see, here and there, a beautiful start which, in part, revives the lofty heights of the past and, in part, employs the advances of the natural sciences.”⁴²

This passage contains both a clear diagnostic of the state of German philosophy at the time and the requirement of a deep reform of philosophy, which Brentano here depicts as a return to the positive spirit that characterizes British empiricism and the positive philosophy of Comte. It also shows that Brentano had seen the signs of an ascendant phase in the history of philosophy in the positivist treatment of philosophy, following the decline of idealist systems, thus reconnecting with climactic moments in the history of philosophy, with Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and Descartes, for instance. “The golden age of philosophy is not past, but rather to come,” later said Brentano.⁴³

2.3. Theism and positive philosophy

As we can see, Comte’s critique of theology and metaphysics chiefly focuses on those modes of explanation having recourse to fictional people or fictional entities, to which he opposes the thesis of the relativity of knowledge. Brentano agrees with Comte’s critique, and recognizes that to acknowledge of the divine will as the only principle of explanation would

⁴² F. Brentano, “Auguste Comte und die positive Philosophie,” p. 131-132.

⁴³ F. Brentano, ‘Über die Zukunft der Philosophie’, in O. Kraus (ed.) *Über die Zukunft der Philosophie ...*, p. 45.

doom all scientific inquiry.⁴⁴ However, Brentano maintains that the admission of a divine being, as posited by theism, is not incompatible with the mode of explanation favored by positive philosophy, and it would be a mistake to see in Comte's critique a mere exclusion of all theological research. For, just as Brentano's Comte does not deny the existence of first causes, but only of our capacity to know them, he also does not deny the existence of God, but only the possibility of our knowing Him.⁴⁵ Once we have discarded "all speculation that sees in divine reason the origin of the world," there is nothing in Comte's positivism contradictory to the admission of a divine power, as required by the theism that Brentano defends in this article. This, at any rate, is the position he attributes to Comte in his *System of Positive Polity*, which he comments as follows:

"That there is a God seems to him just as unknowable in that work. Yet far from rejecting it, he does not hesitate to consider His existence as most probable, to the extent that the order of the world would thereby be made more intelligible than it would be in the case where we only posit an arbitrary and blind mechanism. In fact, although he refuses to make of God, considered as scientifically indemonstrable, the foundation of his morality and politics, he never reasons about the first principles of action without taking Him into account."⁴⁶

2.4. The classification of the sciences

Comte exerted a durable influence on Brentano's thought with regard to the theme of the classification of the sciences, on which he comments briefly in his article and in his 1869 lecture on Comte. It is true that Brentano occasionally refers to the classification proposed by Aristotle in his *Analytica posteriora* in support of some of the amendments that he proposes to Comte's classification, notably with regard to the place of sociology (or to the absence of psychology) in the system of science.⁴⁷ However, it is clear

⁴⁴ F. Brentano, "Auguste Comte und die positive Philosophie," p. 123-124.

⁴⁵ F. Brentano, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

⁴⁶ F. Brentano, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

⁴⁷ Cf. F. Brentano, *Lectures*, p. 275, 285; *Psychology*, p. 20, where he cites a passage from *De Anima* in which Aristotle considers psychology as the highest of the sciences.

that Brentano directly borrows his classificatory principles from Comte, as well as the idea of logical dependence in the hierarchy of subordination of the sciences.⁴⁸ I will limit my discussion here to summarizing the main points in the article dealing with Comte's classification of the sciences, which I will discuss in greater detail in the following section when I analyze his *Psychology*.

In his public lectures on Comte⁴⁹, Brentano remarks that the ordering of the *theoretical* sciences, which is at the root of Comte's classification of the sciences, is presupposed in the theory of the three states, because it is this hierarchy that explains why sciences such as physiology and sociology develop later than other sciences like biology and physics, on which the former depend.⁵⁰ According to Comte's classification, the ordering of the sciences is determined by the degree of generality, of simplicity, and of logical dependence of the phenomena that are the objects of study of these sciences.⁵¹ Brentano emphasizes the fact that the logical dependence at the basis of this classification has its source in the phenomena:

“By applying this fundamental rule of classification to our case, then it is the reciprocal dependences that exist in fact between the different positive science, and starting from which we must classify; and this dependence, if it is to be real, cannot have no other origin than the corresponding phenomena.”⁵²

This dependence, in turn, depends on the degree of simplicity or generality of the phenomena themselves:

⁴⁸ Cf. J. S. Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, p. 34.

⁴⁹ This is, in fact, the H48 manuscript, which has the same title as Brentano's article on Comte, and which contains notes for his 1869 lectures on Comte, as well as excerpts from his article and a sketch of his project for further articles on Comte, previously mentioned. This manuscript has been edited by K. Hedwig under the title: 'Auguste Comte und die positive Philosophie', *Geschichte der Philosophie der Neuzeit*, Hamburg: Meiner, 1987, p. 246-294. To avoid confusing this text with Brentano's article of the same title, we will use the abbreviations *Lectures* to refer to this text.

⁵⁰ F. Brentano, *Lectures*, p. 268.

⁵¹ F. Brentano, *Lectures*, p. 290.

⁵² F. Brentano, *Lectures*, p. 277.

“The simplest phenomena (those that are the least tangled the ones to the others) are necessarily the most general [...]. This order of generality or simplicity necessarily determines the rational sequence of the sundry fundamental sciences through the successive dependence of their phenomena, and thus establishes their degree of complexity.”⁵³

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In the classification proposed by Comte at the outset of his *Lectures*, the two poles of this classification are mathematics and sociology, the first being the most simple and the most universal because all the other sciences depend on it, whereas the science that studies social phenomena is the most complex and the most dependent because its development presupposes all the other sciences that precede it in the hierarchy of sciences.⁵⁴ Between these two limits in the classification, we find astronomy, physics, chemistry, and biology. The set of these sciences constitutes a unity, one determined by the relations of logical dependence between these sciences, thus forming a whole (the encyclopedia) of which they are all parts.

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Brentano adheres without reserve to Comte’s classificatory principles, as is clearly borne out by the classification of the sciences that he elaborated in his *Psychology*. The main criticism that he addresses to Comte at the very end of his article is that of not having acknowledged the legitimacy of the two disciplines that form the two central axes of Brentano’s philosophy, that is, metaphysics (as a discipline) and especially psychology:

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“[Comte] does not sufficiently consider psychological research and metaphysical research (in the ordinary sense of the term) in history, just as he does not recognize their full legitimacy. Yet this other branch of science, psychology, is perhaps the most apt to show how his doctrine of the three stages is everywhere confirmed, if we but apply it in the right way to the history of a science.”⁵⁵

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⁵³ F. Brentano, *Lectures*, p. 290-291.

⁵⁴ F. Brentano, *Lectures*, p. 274.

⁵⁵ F. Brentano, “Auguste Comte und die positive Philosophie,” p. 133. In a passage from his *Psychology*, Brentano proposes to apply the historical method to psychology: “This so-called historical method is also applicable, outside of history, to the psychological field, often to greater advantage than the usual deductive method. Preparatory direct induction shows the way to derivation and gives direction to it. Everyday experience has frequently been elevated to the status of low-level empirical laws which are expressed

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We shall see that Brentano criticised him for having understood psychology as a subdivision of biology, that is, as physiology (or phrenology). Nevertheless, as Brentano explains in this passage, to recognise the scientific status of psychology does not in the least compromise the soundness of Comte's theory of the three states, nor of his classificatory principles for the sciences.

3. Comtean elements in Brentano's Psychology

Little time after being discharged of his functions at Würzburg, Brentano opens talks with the University of Vienna to occupy the position left vacant since the departure of F. Lott, one he would obtain thanks again to Lotze, who had pleaded the Austrian authorities in favor of his candidacy. Between the renunciation of his position at Würzburg in 1873, which would be occupied subsequently by his student Stumpf, and the beginning of his functions at Vienna in early 1874, Brentano devotes most of his time to writing his *Hauptwerk*, published a few months later. Brentano's state of mind at the beginning of his stay in Vienna is clearly expressed in his inaugural lecture at the University of Vienna bearing the title "On the motives of discouragement in the domain of philosophy"⁵⁶. Brentano mounts

in the form of proverbs. "As the twig is bent the tree's inclined," "All beginnings are difficult," "New brooms sweep clean," "Variety is the spice of life," and the like, are expressions of such empirical generalizations", *Psychology*, p. 54.

⁵⁶ F. Brentano, „Über die Gründe der Entmutigung auf philosophischem Gebiet“, in O. Kraus (ed.) *Über die Zukunft der Philosophie ...*, p. 82-100. If we accord credence to a letter from 22 December 1885 written by Brentano to his student Schell, in which he describes the mixed welcome he received upon arriving in Vienna, the ghosts of Würzburg followed him to Austria: "In April [1874], I gave my inaugural lecture, which you might know about, on the motives of discouragement in the philosophical domain. But you could not guess the conditions in which it was given. I myself did not know that I stood as if on a volcano that threatened to erupt at any moment. My honorable Würzburgian enemies had pushed their zeal so far that they published the most hateful stories about me in Viennese papers, on my most intriguing manner of behaving myself with my colleagues, on my Jesuit personality, etc. Fortunately, I had not read them. But my students had thereby been roused; four or five of them filled the hall wherein the minister and other officials were also present, and the plan consisted in provoking an infernal scandal that would have prevented my stay at the university.

an attack on the prejudice according to which philosophy had become an obsolete discipline in the wake of the striking advances of the natural sciences, and he encourages Austrian youth to study philosophy by proposing a reform of that discipline rooted in the principles of empiricist philosophy. However, as Oskar Kraus has noted in his edition of this conference⁵⁷, the fundamental positions defended there by Brentano rest in large part, if not on Comte's positive philosophy *per se*, at least on the results of his research on Comte and on British empiricism. 5

Brentano begins the lecture by declaring that the epoch of worldviews and of the *a priori* construction of grand speculative systems has come to an end, and that the future of philosophy now belongs to researchers who practice philosophy in the spirit of the natural sciences. 10

"There is no longer any room for doubt that, in the domain of philosophy, there can be no other teacher than experience, and that it is no longer a question of exposing in detail one worldview as a whole, in one stroke of genius; but, just as other researchers, the philosopher can conquer his domain of research by moving forward step by step."⁵⁸ 15

Brentano would repeat this maxim in the preface to his *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* ("Experience alone is my teacher")⁵⁹. It is in this perspective that Brentano undertakes his reform of philosophy based on the philosophical programme the main lines of which he presents in this conference, and which he would develop systematically in his *Psychology*. 20

The inaugural lecture and many passages in the *Psychology* contain a number of elements that allow us to follow up on Brentano's discussion 25

Indeed, after a few words, a good number of students started whispering. But the majority, preferring to wait for me to pronounce a condemnable word, did not rejoin them. And I continued to speak, without even noticing the misdeed. Then, will you have it! It turned out I had been lucky enough to win over the public's sympathy during the lecture. Expressions of agreement were heard and were repeated, and the hour that was supposed to be my gravest ended with such applause from the young audience that a Section Head assured me no other new teacher had yet been received with such enthusiasm." Letter cited in D. Fisette and G. Fréchette, 'Le legs de Brentano', in *À l'école de Brentano ...*, p. 30. 30

⁵⁷ O. Kraus, *Über die Zukunft der Philosophie ...*, p. 157. 35

⁵⁸ F. Brentano, „Über die Gründe der Entmutigung auf philosophischem Gebiet“, p. 85.

⁵⁹ F. Brentano, *Psychology*, p. XXV.

in his article on Comte, and establish his position with regard to the positive philosophy of the French philosopher in 1874. We can begin with the question of the scientific status of psychology, which Brentano attempts to rehabilitate by rejecting Comte's arguments against introspective psychology based on internal observation. In his *Psychology*, Brentano takes up the essential elements of Comte's classification of the sciences, with the important difference that sociology is replaced by psychology in Brentano's classification. Psychology is understood as an empirical science whose object of study is the analysis of mental phenomena. In addition to the notion of phenomenon, which Brentano understands in the same way as Comte, another important task assigned to psychology by Brentano, the classification of psychic phenomena, follows the same classificatory principles that Brentano attributes to Comte in his 1869 article. Finally, there are also the metaphysical considerations that Brentano invokes at the beginning of his *Psychology* with regard to the Aristotelian definition of psychology as a science of the soul, which he criticizes for its metaphysical presuppositions. The set of Comtean elements just mentioned are some of the most fundamental aspects of Brentano's philosophy in his *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*. In this section, I will examine some of the Comtean elements that Brentano discusses in his inaugural lecture and in his *Psychology*, while also taking into consideration his article and his public lectures on Comte.

Let us start with Brentano's remark at the end of his article on Comte, where he criticises Aristotle for conveying certain metaphysical presuppositions in a number of his doctrines, notably in that of substance and of accident.⁶⁰ Brentano seems to repeat the same reproach at the very beginning of his *Psychology*, when he compares the Aristotelian conception of psychology as a science of the soul with the one defining it as the science of mental phenomena. Brentano, in effect, seems to criticise Aristotle for conceiving of the object of psychology, that is, the soul, as a substance, and

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⁶⁰ F. Brentano, "Auguste Comte und die positive Philosophie," p. 132: "Aristotle who, despite being a theist, is not a theological thinker (in the erroneous sense), despite depending on metaphysical conceptions in a number of his doctrines, such as those of potency and act, of substance of accident, etc.—this, even his greatest admirer cannot deny. He is nevertheless already a positive researcher by his character. Up until him, there is an order similar to the one Comte determines in a general manner. Consequently, we should have expected a refinement and more perfect development of the positive spirit."

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of psychical phenomena such as desire or fear as its accidents or its essential properties. However, argues Brentano, from an empirical point of view, this is nothing but a mere metaphysical postulate, a fiction that, because it is not an object of experience, that is, an object accessible to internal perception, cannot consequently constitute the object of psychology. Hence the idea of a “psychology without a soul” that is supposed to have no metaphysical presuppositions.⁶¹

We have noted that one of Brentano’s main criticisms of Comte at the very end of his article is that of neglecting and underestimating the value of

⁶¹ F. Brentano, *Psychology*, p. 13-14. In his article ‘Brentano and Comte’ (*Grazer Philosophische Studien*, vol. 35, 1989, p. 33-54), D. Münch has highlighted the influence of Comte on Brentano’s critique of Aristotle’s psychology. He defends the following thesis: “It is the influence of this positive philosophy, I want to claim, which makes it understandable why we miss the soul in the published volumes of Brentano’s *Psychology*. For Brentano’s theory of psychical phenomena is in fact an answer to the question: how can we deal with psychical phenomena in the framework of positive philosophy?” (p. 36). I believe Münch has a tendency to minimize Aristotle’s contribution and to overestimate Comte’s on Brentano’s *Psychology* when he writes, concluding his article: “We can therefore already at this stage of our examination say that Brentano’s *Psychology* is something like a purification of Aristotelian psychology, with positive philosophy as the *purgamen*” (41). As I have shown in the first part of this study, this purge had begun before Brentano becomes interested in Comte’s philosophy, and the empiricist framework in which Brentano elaborates his 1874 psychology is more heavily indebted to Mill than to Comte’s positivism. However, I acknowledge the direct influence exerted by Comte on questions pertaining to the scientific status of psychology, and we will see that Brentano’s *Psychology* takes up many Comtean ideas, such as his classificatory principles for the sciences, his doctrine of phenomena, and certain methodological aspects related to the practice of empirical science. However, even if we acknowledge that Brentano administers the same treatment to Aristotle that Comte had prescribed for metaphysics, understood as a mode of explanation of phenomena appealing to fictions, we must also acknowledge that Brentano draws on the Stagirite to counter Comte’s arguments, in order to rehabilitate psychology in the hierarchy of the sciences; and he also aligns himself with Aristotle on a number of the theses central to his *Psychology*, notably those on intentionality and consciousness. In restricting the question of the relation between psychology and metaphysics to Brentano’s critique of the old psychology in his *Psychology*, Münch neglects a much more important aspect of this question, to wit, that the philosophical project of psychology as science entails radical transformations in the relation between these two disciplines, to the extent that the domain of psychology seems to have a priority over that of metaphysics. This transformation is the consequence of his empiricism, and not of some outside influence.

psychology in his classification of the sciences. In his *Psychology*, Brentano examines some of the arguments that motivate Comte's judgment about psychology and that justify his rejection of its scientific status. Comte's main argument rests on his critique of introspection, which he understands
 5 as an observation directed inward, and which he rightly appraises as absurd. This is why, as Mill explains, Comte proposes to reduce psychology to a branch of physiology:

10 "He rejects totally, as an invalid process, psychological observation properly so called, or in other words, internal consciousness, at least as regards our intellectual operations. He gives no place in his series of the science of Psychology, and always speaks of it with contempt. The study of mental
 15 phaenomena, or, as he expresses it, of moral and intellectual functions, has a place in his scheme, under the head of Biology, but only as a branch of physiology. Our knowledge of the human mind must, he thinks, be acquired by observing other people. How we are to observe other people's mental operations, or how interpret the signs of them without having learnt what the signs mean by knowledge of ourselves, he does not state."⁶²

20 Brentano recognizes the close relation between psychology and physiology, but argues, against Comte, that psychology is a field of research distinct from physiology. Let us examine Comte's arguments against an introspective psychology that Brentano examines in his *Psychology*. The following excerpt from Comte's *Course in Positive Philosophy* clearly summarizes
 25 Comte's position on introspection:

30 "As for observing in the same manner intellectual phenomena while they are taking place, this is clearly impossible. The thinking subject cannot divide himself into two parts, one of which would reason, while the other would observe its reasoning. In this instance, the observing and the observed organ being identical, how could observation take place? The very principle upon which this so-called psychological method is based, therefore, is invalid. Moreover, let us consider to what entirely contradictory
 35 procedures this method immediately leads. On the one hand we are told to isolate ourselves as much as possible from every external sensation, and

⁶² J. S. Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, p. 67.

especially to restrain ourselves from all intellectual work; even if we were only dealing with the simplest mathematical calculation, what would then happen to inner observation? On the other hand, after having finally attained through these measures this state of perfect intellectual sleep, we should devote ourselves to the contemplation of the operations which are occurring in our mind when nothing goes on in it any longer. To their amusement, our descendants will undoubtedly witness the disavowal of such an assumption.”⁶³

Comte’s argument is that we cannot observe internal phenomena in the way an authentic science observes phenomena through external observation, and that as a consequence of this, introspection is an aberration. Brentano acknowledges with Comte that self-consciousness, if it is understood as a kind of internal observation, is a principled impossibility, but he criticises him for confusing internal observation and self-consciousness, the latter which Brentano specifically refers to as internal perception.⁶⁴ Mill, too, agrees with Comte that internal observation is not an appropriate method to study our intellectual operations, and for his part prefers memory.⁶⁵ But Brentano also rejects Mill’s⁶⁶ preferred option, and argues that only internal perception can serve as an appropriate mode of access to knowledge about our internal psychic life:

“Psychology, like the natural sciences, has its basis in perception and experience. Above all, however, its source is to be found in the *inner perception* of our own mental phenomena. We would never know what a thought is, or a judgement, pleasure or pain, desires or aversions, hopes or fears, courage or despair, decisions and voluntary intentions if we did not learn what they are through inner perception of our own phenomena.”⁶⁷

⁶³ A. Comte cited by F. Brentano in *Psychology*, p. 24.

⁶⁴ “Inner perception of our own mental phenomena, then, is the primary source of the experiences essential to psychological investigations. And this inner perception is not to be confused with inner observation of our mental states, since anything of that sort is impossible.” F. Brentano, *Psychology*, p. 26.

⁶⁵ J. S. Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, p. 68.

⁶⁶ F. Brentano, *Psychology*, p. 26.

⁶⁷ F. Brentano, *Psychology*, p. 22.

We can appraise the stakes of this discussion by appreciating the importance granted by Brentano's philosophy to internal perception. This is because, for Brentano, internal perception is not only the single available channel of information about mental phenomena, it is furthermore an essential component of his theory of knowledge and his theory of truth.

What about the place of psychology in Brentano's classification of the sciences? This question is explored in his inaugural address at the University of Vienna and in the first book of his *Psychology*, bearing the title "Psychology as a science." Brentano there takes up Comte's classificatory criteria, that is, simplicity, generality, and logical dependence, but he makes important amendments to his classification of the sciences, the most important of which is the replacement of sociology by psychology.⁶⁸ Brentano, in effect, holds that sociology is a branch of psychology, and that the social phenomena it studies essentially belong to the class of psychic phenomena:

"Sociology, like all other branches of philosophy as well, is related to psychology. For this reason, they will be assembled into the same group, because their investigations are related to one another by the most intimate bonds."⁶⁹

"Obviously, social phenomena belong to psychic phenomena, and here, we can appeal as classificatory principle to no other knowledge than the knowledge of psychic laws, and hence philosophical knowledge."⁷⁰

What can be said of sociology, in turn, applies to aesthetics and ethics, the object of study of which belong to mental phenomena, and the main task of psychology is to seek laws that govern the relations between these phe-

⁶⁸ It is also these principles that subtend the classification of psychical phenomena into three classes in Brentano's psychology, that is, into representation, judgment, and emotions. The class of representations is the simplest and the most universal, while the two other classes are more complex and logically depend on the class of representations. "Here, as everywhere, the relative independence, simplicity and universality of the classes must determine their order. On this principle, it is clear that presentation deserves the primary place, for it is the simplest of the three phenomena, while judgement and love always include a presentation within them. It is likewise the most independent of the three, since it is the foundation for the others, and, for exactly the same reason, it is the most universal." p. 207.

⁶⁹ F. Brentano, 'Über die Gründe der Entmutigung auf philosophischem Gebiet', p. 94.

⁷⁰ F. Brentano, 'Über die Gründe ...', p. 100.

nomena, laws which are presupposed by sociology. As Brentano explains, psychology is the philosophical science *par excellence*, and the phenomena that it studies constitute the noblest of objects in the evolution of science and of humanity in general.

Psychology is thus, along with mathematics, one of the two poles of Brentano's classification of the sciences: "Mathematics considers the most simple and independent phenomena, psychology those that are most dependent and complex."⁷¹ Between these two poles, in Brentano's classification, we find physics, chemistry, biology, and physiology, which form a series going from the more abstract sciences to the more concrete ones⁷², the ordering of which is conditioned by relations of logical dependence from the most complex to the most simple sciences. The most simple and universal of all is mathematics, which is the only one to be autonomous with respect to the others in the hierarchy of the sciences. This hierarchy is indispensable to understand why some sciences, such as psychology and physiology, do not evolve at the same pace as the sciences that they presuppose, and why physiology and psychology show a significant lag with regard to the progress of the sciences that precede them in the latter of the sciences:

"The general theoretical sciences form a kind of hierarchy in which each higher step is erected on the basis of the one below it. The higher sciences investigate more complex phenomena, the lower ones phenomena that are simpler, but which contribute to the complexity. The progress of the sciences which stand higher in the scale naturally presupposes that of the lower ones. It is, therefore, evident that, apart from certain weak empirical antecedents, the higher sciences will attain their development later than the lower. In particular, they will not be able to reach that state of maturity in which they can meet the vital needs of life at the same time as the lower sciences. [...] It is easy to explain why physiology developed so late. The phenomena it studies are much more complex than those studied by the earlier sciences and are dependent upon them, just as the phenomena of chemistry are dependent upon those of physics and the phenomena of physics are dependent upon those of mathematics. But it is just as easy to understand,

⁷¹ F. Brentano, *Psychology*, p. 21.

⁷² F. Brentano, 'Über die Gründe ...', p. 93.

then, why psychology has not borne more abundant fruit up until now. Just as physical phenomena are under the influence of mathematical laws, and chemical phenomena are under the influence of physical laws, and those of physiology under the influence of all these laws, so psychological phenomena are influenced by the laws governing the forces which shape and renew the bodily organs involved.”⁷³

Not only is psychology lagging behind the strides made by the other sciences, but the status of the laws to which it has recourse in its explanation of the succession of psychic phenomena is importantly different from the status of laws in the other sciences. For, the laws of psychology are empirical generalizations, acquired through induction, and as such, they are incomplete and inexact compared to the laws of the sciences of physical phenomena, especially those of mathematics, which are the paradigm of scientific laws in Comte’s system of science. This is why physiology, as a science of physical phenomena, is indispensable to the development of psychology, to the extent that “the discovery of the really ultimate laws of the succession of mental phenomena is possible only on the basis of physiological facts”⁷⁴.

However, there are additional reasons that explain the close relation established by Brentano between physiology and psychology. As is borne out by his classification, in which physiology immediately precedes psychology in the hierarchy of the sciences, Brentano acknowledges that psychology depends on physiology, and more specifically of the physiology of the senses, and this because, on the one hand, mental states “are given to us only in relation to organisms and in their dependence on certain physiological processes”⁷⁵ and, on the other hand, because sensations constitute an important source of psychical phenomena belonging to the simplest class of mental phenomena in Brentano’s classification of psychical phenomena, to wit, that its first are the representations directly related to physical phenomena.

⁷³ F. Brentano, *Psychology*, p. 17-18.

⁷⁴ F. Brentano, *Psychology*, p. 47.

⁷⁵ F. Brentano, „Über die Gründe ...“, pp. 93-94.

“The investigation of the primary mental elements is mainly concerned with sensations, since sensations are undoubtedly a source of other mental phenomena, and more than a few scientists assert that sensations alone are the source of all phenomena. Sensations are effects of physical stimuli. Their origin is thus a psychophysical process. It is for this reason that physiology, especially the physiology of sense organs, provides appreciable help to psychology here.”⁷⁶

Despite the intimate ties between physiology and psychology, we cannot abolish the frontiers between both disciplines. In his *Psychology*⁷⁷, Brentano instead favors a division of labor between psychologists and physiologists, one that anticipates in many respects the one he would later propose in his lectures on descriptive psychology⁷⁸, between what he calls “psychogenosy” (or phenomenology) and genetic psychology (or physiology). In this respect, one of the criticisms he addressed to Comte⁷⁹ and the physiological psychology of W. Wundt, for instance, is to overestimate the contribution of physiology and of physiological method to the study of mental phenomena. This reproach is more specifically directed at Comte’s usage of phrenology as an “instrument of psychological investigation.”⁸⁰ Brentano maintains that the analysis and description of mental phenomena has priority on their explanation by physiology, and that the only mode of access to mental phenomena available to the psychologist is internal perception, the object of which distinguishes it from the sciences of physical phenomena, namely psychic phenomena.

⁷⁶ F. Brentano, *Psychology*, p. 35.

⁷⁷ F. Brentano, *Psychology*, p. 5.

⁷⁸ In fact, this distinction has its origins in the Würzburg period, as G. Fréchette has shown in his article ‘Franz Brentano in Würzburg: Die Anfänge der deskriptiven Psychologie’, in A. Stock, H.-P. Brauns, U. Wolfradt (eds.), *Historische Analysen theoretischer und empirischer Psychologie*, Frankfurt: P. Lang, 2012, p. 91-106; cf. Brentano, *Deskriptive Psychologie*, R. Chisholm and W. Baumgartner (eds.) Hamburg: Meiner, 1982.

⁷⁹ F. Brentano, *Psychology*, p. 37.

⁸⁰ F. Brentano, *Psychology*, p. 36. Stuart Mill raises this question in his work on Comte: “And what Organon for the study of ‘the moral and intellectual functions’ does M. Comte offer, in lieu of the direct mental observation which he repudiates? We are almost ashamed to say, that it is Phrenology!” (p. 69).

The place of psychology in Brentano's classification of the sciences raises questions other than that of its scientific status. We have seen that Brentano understands it as a science without a soul, the domain of study of which is delimited by the psychical phenomena available through internal perception. Psychology distinguishes itself from the others sciences by its object and its mode of access to its field of study, firstly from the natural sciences, the objects of which are physical phenomena.⁸¹ And we know that the notion of intentional inexistence, by which Brentano characterizes mental phenomena, is also the main criterion of his classification of phenomena into two classes. Given these important differences between psychology and the natural sciences, the question arises of determining what makes of psychology a science as authentic as the sciences that precede it in the hierarchy of the sciences, and which it presupposes. Here again, the rapprochement with Comte's positive philosophy suggests itself, because the definition of science used by Brentano in his *Psychology* is very close to the one he attributes to positive philosophy in his article on Comte. For lack of being able to here address in detail this complex question, I will conclude my analysis of the Comtean elements present in Brentano's *Psychology* with a few remarks on phenomenalism and the notion of phenomenon.

The notion of phenomenon, as Brentano uses it in his *Psychology*, has a number of affinities with Comte's. As Brentano explains, the notion of phenomenon is often employed as contrasted with what really exists, and the phenomena studied by the sciences, such as sound or heat, for example, do not have any real existence outside of observation; they are only mere phenomena and "signs of something real, which, through its causal activity, produces presentations of them"⁸². This is why Brentano maintains that we cannot claim that objects of external perception really are how they seem to us, as opposed to psychic phenomena, the reality of which is guaranteed by the evidence of internal perception. As Brentano explains:

"We have no experience of that which truly exists, in and of itself, and that which we do experience is not true. The truth of physical phenomena is, as they say, only a relative truth."⁸³

⁸¹ F. Brentano, *Psychology*, p. 14.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

This does not mean that Brentano defends one form or another of phenomenalism, as some commentators of Brentano have suggested.⁸⁴ If by phenomenalism, we mean the reduction of the world to phenomena or to functional relations between sensible phenomena, this position cannot be attributed to Brentano. For, Brentano acknowledges the existence and the reality of a transcendent world, even if he claims that we only have access to it through phenomena. 5

“We could express the scientific task of the natural sciences by saying something to the effect that they are those sciences which seek to explain the succession of physical phenomena connected with normal and pure sensations (that is, sensations which are not influenced by special mental conditions and processes) on the basis of the assumption of a world which resembles one which has three dimensional extension in space and flows in *one* direction in time, and which influences our sense organs. Without explaining the absolute nature of this world, these sciences would limit themselves to ascribing to its forces capable of producing sensations and of exerting a reciprocal influence upon one another, and determining for these forces the laws of co-existence and succession.”⁸⁵ 10 15

In a note to this passage, Brentano associates the notion of force to what Mill calls “the permanent possibilities of sensation,”⁸⁶ in his work on Ham- 20

⁸⁴ In his introduction to the second edition of the English translation of Brentano (p. XVI), P. Simons attributes a form of phenomenalism to him, what he calls methodological phenomenalism, and this interpretation has been taken up by other commentators of Brentano. But the very notion of phenomenalism seems to cause problems when he acknowledges that Brentano never adhered to the sensualist and reductionist theses associated to phenomenalism, as can clearly be seen from Brentano’s lectures on positivism and monism from 1893-1894, which we discuss below. On the Comtean origin of the notion of phenomenon as Brentano uses it in his *Psychology*, cf. J. Benoist, “Le naturalisme de Brentano”, 138 ff. 25 30

⁸⁵ F. Brentano, *Psychology*, p. 74.

⁸⁶ J. S. Mill, *An examination of Sir William Hamilton’s philosophy, and of the principal philosophical questions discussed in his writings*, London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts & Green, 1865. Brentano refers to chapter 11 of that work: “The psychological theory of the belief in an external world,” where Mill discusses the famous doctrine of permanent possibilities of sensation, by which he attempts to explain that our belief in an external world is nothing other than a belief in these permanent possibilities of sensation: “The conception I form of the world existing at any moment, comprises, 35

ilton, and remarks that the notion of physical phenomenon refers in the end to “the external causes of sensation” that are manifest in sensations.⁸⁷ Here, we can recognize the thesis of the relativity of knowledge that we have addressed above.

5 Rather than subscribing to one form or another of phenomenalism, the philosophy defended by Brentano in his *Psychology* is closer to “phenomenology” in the narrow sense of a science of phenomena, which that we find in the writings of many of Brentano’s contemporaries, in philosophers and scientists such as Stumpf and Husserl, or again E. Mach and E. Hering.⁸⁸

Concluding remarks

15 In the Viennese period, Brentano continues to take interest in Comte’s positivism, as can be seen from his 1893-1894 lectures in Vienna (“Contemporary philosophical questions”) on the relations between positivism and monism in Comte, Kirchhoff, Mach, and Mill.⁸⁹ In the first part of

20 along with the sensations I am feeling, a countless variety of possibilities of sensation; namely, the whole of those which past observation tells me that I could, under any supposable circumstances, experience at this moment, together with an indefinite and illimitable multitude of others which though I do not know that I could, yet it is possible that I might, experience in circumstances not known to me. These various possibilities are the important thing to me in the world. My present sensations are generally of little importance, and are moreover fugitive: the possibilities, on the contrary, are permanent, which is the character that mainly distinguishes our idea of
25 Substance or Matter from our notion of sensation.” (p. 237-238).

⁸⁷ F. Brentano, *Psychology*, p. 75-76.

⁸⁸ Cf. my article “Phenomenology and phenomenalism: Ernst Mach and the genesis of Husserl’s phenomenology”, *Axiomathes* 22 (2012), 53-74.

⁸⁹ The manuscript of the 1893-1894 lectures ‘Zeitbewegende philosophische Fragen’ has not yet been published; it bears the signature LS 20. In a letter to Husserl from 26-12-1893, Brentano writes about these lectures: “I am presently teaching a course on contemporary philosophical questions. I even finished the first part on positivism. I focused notably on Comte, Kirchhoff, Mill, and Mach. I now turn to monism, and with the help of detailed considerations on the nature of space and on atomistic conceptions, of which I partially approve, and which I justify and complete in part, I would like to prepare the decision I will make. If I succeed in refuting monism, I also hope to show that dualism is implausible, and to then be in a position to suggest an alternative solution at an infinite distance from both positions,” F. Brentano in E. Husserl, *Briefwechsel. Die Brentanoschule*, K. Schuhmann (ed.) Dordrecht: Kluwer,

these lectures, Brentano grants much importance to the comparative study of Comte's positivism and Kirchhoff's descriptivism, to which Mach also subscribed. From the methodological point of view, a rapprochement urges itself between the descriptivism of the Kirchhoff school and the importance granted to descriptive psychology starting from the 1880s in the work of Brentano and his students. There, Brentano also studies Comte's theory of the three stages, and essentially adopts the same positions with regard to Comte that he held in his earlier texts.⁹⁰ 5

Brentano refers to these lectures in a letter to Mach from May 20 1895. This letter has particular significance because it is addressed to the one who was called to succeed him as Chair of history and theory of the inductive sciences, left vacant since Brentano's resignation in 1880. Mach addresses a letter to him (14-05-1895), in which he relates his nomination at Vienna and thanks him for supporting his candidacy despite the circumstances that led to his departure from Vienna in 1895. It is in response to this letter from Mach that Brentano, after rejoicing about his nomination in Vienna, related his position on positivism to him in his final lessons at Vienna: 10 15

"You probably do not know that, by happenstance, in the first part of the lectures I taught last winter on the theme of positivism and monism, I addressed your positions on that theme in detail. I considered Comte and Kirchhoff as the representatives of a thoughtless positivism, whereas I considered J. Stuart Mill and Mach as the representatives of an evolved positivism. However, I attempted to show why one form or another of positivism proves to be untenable. [...] I am and always have been convinced that consensus on mere wording—even if its significance is great—is of less import than consensus on research methods."⁹¹ 20 25

Brentano's position on positivism evolved over time, but this excerpt shows that despite his reservations with regard to positivism, his views regarding research methods remain the same. Furthermore, we can see that his ap- 30

1994, vol. I, p. 14-15. On Brentano's lectures, see D. Fisette "Brentano's lectures on positivism (1893-1894) and his relationship with Ernst Mach", in F. Stadler (ed.) *The Centenary of Ernst Mach*, Berlin: Springer, collection Ernst Mach Circle, (forthcoming).

⁹⁰ F. Brentano, "Zeitbewegende philosophische Fragen" (unpublished); (cf. p. 29378 ff.). 35

⁹¹ F. Brentano, *Über Ernst Machs 'Erkenntnis und Irrtum'*, R. Chisholm et J. Marek (eds.) (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988), pp. 204-205.

praisal of Mill's philosophy did not change, and we know that Brentano had been greatly interested in Mach's positivism, notably in his doctrine of sensations, after leaving Vienna.⁹² Let us note in closing that despite distancing himself from Comte during the Vienna period, Brentano held
 5 Comte as one of his privileged interlocutors in a number of lectures and dictations, where he explores questions related notably to religion.⁹³

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⁹² The notes dictated by Brentano in Florence during winter 1905-1906 bear witness to this. These notes and his correspondence with Mach have been published under the direction of R. Chisholm and J. Marek under the title *Über Ernst Machs 'Erkenntnis und Irrtum'* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988). Brentano's interest in Mach's classic work on sensations clearly comes to the fore in his article bearing the title 'Von der psychologischen Analyse der Tonqualitäten in ihre eigentlich ersten Elemente' (F. Brentano, *Untersuchungen zur Sinnespsychologie* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1979), pp. 93-103), which he had prepared for the Vth international conference on psychology held in Rome in 1905, in which he discusses the doctrines of Stumpf and Mach.

⁹³ Brentano often discusses Comte's conception of religion and of the "great being" in his lectures and research manuscripts; cf. the references in J. Werle, *Franz Brentano und die Zukunft der Philosophie*, p. 39.

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