Abstract

By “Brentanian inner consciousness” I mean the conception of inner consciousness developed by Franz Brentano. The aim of this paper is threefold: first, to present Brentano’s account of inner consciousness; second, to discuss this account in light of the mereology outlined by Brentano himself; and third, to decide whether this account incurs an infinite regress. In this regard, I distinguish two kinds of infinite regress: external infinite regress and internal infinite regress. I contend that the most plausible reading of Brentano’s account is the so-called fusion thesis, and I argue that internal infinite regress turns out to be inherent to Brentanian inner consciousness.

Keywords

Brentano · Consciousness · Intentionality · Infinite regress · Mereology

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1 Introduction

Contemporary theories of consciousness such as higher-order theories (see Armstrong 1968; Lycan 1990; Carruthers 2000; Rosenthal 2005) and self-representationalism (see Kriegel and Williford 2006) attempt to give an account of the consciousness of our mental states. This specific kind of consciousness was already investigated by Franz Brentano under the name inner consciousness. One of the main concerns of this renowned philosopher of mind was to give a description of inner consciousness which would avoid an infinite series of mental states. I refer to this problem as the infinite regress problem. The principal aim of this paper is to evaluate whether Brentanian inner consciousness succeeded in solving the infinite regress problem.

Many things could be said about the genesis and the impact of Brentano’s conception. However, my aim is not to provide a historical reconstruction of Brentanian inner consciousness. Even though I will focus on Brentano’s statements, I will not discuss them in chronological order, nor will I try to decide whether and when Brentano changed his mind. From an exegetical point of view, what I will try to do is identify the different readings of Brentano’s account and decide which is the most plausible one. From a systematic point of view, what I will try to do is conceptualize these readings as rigorously as possible and discuss their theoretical implications.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, I present the account of inner consciousness given by Brentano; second, I discuss this account in light of the mereology outlined by Brentano himself; third, I consider whether this account incurs an infinite regress. I distinguish two kinds of infinite regress: external infinite regress and internal infinite regress. I contend that the most plausible reading of Brentano’s account is the so-called fusion thesis, and I argue that internal infinite regress turns out to be inherent to Brentanian inner consciousness. In this regard, I should point out that such a critique has been already put forward by numerous Husserl scholars (see Küng 1978, p. 173; Gurwitsch 1979, pp. 89–90; Zahavi 1998, pp. 131–140; Jordan 2016, pp. 21–22). However, I think that my exposition of the critique is more rigorous, both from an exegetical and a systematic point of view, for unlike those scholars, I scrutinize the attempts to present Brentano’s account as immune to any kind of infinite regress.
2 Brentano’s account of inner consciousness

According to Brentano’s most famous thesis (also known as Brentano’s thesis), what characterizes a mental phenomenon is the directedness towards an object. To put it succinctly:

(B1) Every mental phenomenon is consciousness of an object.

In chapter 2 of the second volume of *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (henceforth: *PES II*), Brentano distinguishes two senses of the term “conscious” (bewusst): in an active sense (conscious$_a$), $x$ is said to be consciousness of an object, whereas in a passive sense (conscious$_p$), $x$ is said to be an object of consciousness. Thus, in Brentano’s framework, every mental phenomenon is conscious$_a$ (see B1 above), and “$x$ is unconscious$_p$” means “$x$ is not an object of consciousness.”

The claim that Brentano aims to argue for in chapter 2 of *PES II* is the following:

(B2) Every mental phenomenon is an object of consciousness.

In other words, he wants to argue that every mental phenomenon is conscious in both an active and a passive sense. To begin the discussion, Brentano formulates the following question: is an unconscious$_p$ consciousness possible? Given his distinction between the two senses of “conscious,” the expression “unconscious consciousness” is not necessarily contradictory: if “unconscious” is meant in a passive sense, then the contradiction is easily avoided. Consider hearing, which is a mental phenomenon. One could formulate the question: is an unconscious$_p$ hearing possible? That is, is a hearing which is not an object of consciousness possible? Brentano’s principal aim in chapter 2 of *PES II* is to defend B2. More specifically, he wants to argue that B2, when suitably clarified, does not incur an infinite regress. In Brentano’s terms, B2 says that for every mental phenomenon there is an inner consciousness of it. By “inner consciousness” (or “inner perception”) Brentano means simply a consciousness (or a perception) of a mental phenomenon (see Brentano 1995a [1874], p. 78 note). He uses various expressions to indicate the tangential character of inner consciousness: it “accompanies” (begleitet) the mental phenomenon, which therefore is “co-apprehended” (miterfasst), that is, apprehended “accessorially” (en parergo), “incidentally” (nebenbei), or “additionally” (als Zugabe). Let us take a closer look at Brentano’s theory.
According to Brentano’s account of inner consciousness, every mental phenomenon has two objects (see Brentano 1995a [1874], pp. 97–98). Consider again hearing: sound is said to be the primary object of hearing, whereas the hearing itself is said to be the secondary object of hearing. Thus Brentano speaks also of “primary consciousness” (in our example, consciousness of the sound) and “secondary consciousness” (in our example, consciousness of hearing), where secondary consciousness is inner consciousness.3 He thus proposes what is known as the double relation (Doppelbeziehung) thesis: every mental phenomenon has (primarily) a relation to something distinct from it and (secondarily) a relation to itself. This is the core of self-representationalism, which is in fact a neo-Brentanian theory of consciousness.

Saying that intentionality can be reflexive, the double relation thesis allows Brentano to block an infinite regress. Indeed, the Brentanian explanation of B2 does not say that for every mental phenomenon M, M is the object of a distinct mental phenomenon (say, M'), but rather that for every mental phenomenon M, M is the object of M.5 Thus, Brentano says, in the case of the hearing there are just two phenomena: the sound, which is a physical phenomenon, and the hearing, which is a mental phenomenon.

Still, the statements that Brentano makes in PES II have given rise to three different (and incompatible) readings of his account. Let us refer to primary consciousness as C1 and secondary consciousness as C2. Here are the three readings:

The identity thesis (henceforth: IT): C1 and C2 are identical.

The constituency thesis (henceforth: CT): C1 is to C2 as a part of x is to x.

The fusion thesis (henceforth: FT): C1 is to C2 as a part p of x is to a part p’ of x.

It is worth noting that while FT is formulated in these terms by Brentano himself, CT can arise only if we translate Brentano’s vague statements into the language of mereology. Let us consider these readings one by one.

2.1 The identity thesis

The statements which seem to validate IT6 are the following:

i. It is only by considering a mental phenomenon in its relation to two different objects that we “dismember (zergliedern) it conceptually (begrifflich) into two consciousness.”7
ii. Every mental phenomenon “can be considered under different aspects (Seite)” (Brentano 1995\textsuperscript{a} [1874], p. 119), that is, as primary consciousness or as secondary consciousness.

Recently, \textit{IT} has been defended by Kriegel (2018). By focusing on the second statement, Kriegel proposes to read Brentano’s account of inner consciousness in light of a Fregean concept of identity; \( C_1 \) and \( C_2 \) would then be to the mental phenomenon as the morning star and the evening star are to the planet Venus. Though there are two meanings, they have the same reference: one and the same mental phenomenon (the hearing, say) can be framed either as “consciousness of the sound” or as “consciousness of itself.” He backs up his interpretation by invoking Brentano’s mereology of consciousness. Indeed, according to Kriegel’s (2018, pp. 87–93) reading of the first statement, \( C_1 \) and \( C_2 \) are \textit{parts only in thought}, that is, they are \textit{merely conceptual parts}. Kriegel claims that this is what Brentano means when he states that \( C_1 \) and \( C_2 \) are “distinctional parts” or “divisives.” Ultimately, Kriegel’s interpretation is quite sophisticated (or “impressionistic”, in his own words): on the one hand, \( C_1 \) and \( C_2 \) are meant to exist just as ways of framing a mental phenomenon: \textit{as such}—i.e. as meanings—they \textit{are not} identical. On the other hand, \( C_1 \) and \( C_2 \) are meant to be conceptualizations of \textit{one and the same entity} (the mental phenomenon). In this sense, they \textit{are} identical.\footnote{Such a reading is highly disputable for two exegetical reasons: first, because Brentano explicitly denies that \( C_1 \) and \( C_2 \) are identical, since in his mereology a part \( x \) of \( y \) cannot be identical either with a part \( z \) of \( y \), or with \( y \);\footnote{and second, because distinctional parts or divisives are not parts only in thought, but rather are \textit{real parts}—i.e. \textit{parts in reality}—which are \textit{separable only in thought}. In the next section I will try to show that the second point is the ground for the correct interpretation of Brentano’s first statement.} Moreover, if other theses presented in \textit{PES II} are taken into account, it can be shown that \textit{IT} is exegetically implausible. Indeed, Brentano ascribes to \( C_1 \) and \( C_2 \) \textit{contradictory} properties: \( C_1 \) is said to be fallible (see Brentano 1995\textsuperscript{a} [1874], p. 72), whereas \( C_2 \) is said to be infallible. Hardly anyone would claim that two qualitatively distinguishable things can be one and the same thing.

### 2.2 The constituency thesis

The statements which seem to validate \textit{CT}\footnote{\textsuperscript{10}} are the following:
i. Primary consciousness “contributes innerly to the being” (Brentano 1995a [1874], p. 98; translation slightly modified) of secondary consciousness.

ii. The object of primary consciousness “belongs to the content”\(^\text{11}\) of secondary consciousness.

First of all, it should be noted that \(\text{CT}\) is consistent with a thesis which Brentano endorses, namely, that inner consciousness is \textit{infallible} (see Brentano 1995a [1874], \textit{passim}). For if \(C_1\) is a part of \(C_2\), it is not possible that \(C_2\) really exists and \(C_1\) does not really exist; this follows from the premise that if \(x\) is a part of \(y\), then the real existence of \(y\) entails the real existence of \(x\) (see Brentano 1995a [1874], p. 71). This means that when we are conscious of the hearing, it \textit{is not} possible that we are hallucinating the consciousness of the sound. In contrast, when we are conscious of the sound, it \textit{is} possible that we are hallucinating the sound. \(C_1\) may be thought to be fallible because the sound is part of the hearing only in an \textit{improper} sense (i.e. it is not really a part of the hearing). In Brentano’s words, the sound is only a \textit{modifying} part of the hearing (see section \(3\) below).

In my reconstruction, \(\text{CT}\) is formulated in \textit{mereological} terms (“\(C_1\) is to \(C_2\) as a part of \(x\) is to \(x\)”). Hence, it seems as if both the phrases “contributes innerly to the being” and “belongs to the content” can be interpreted in such terms. However, while a mereological reading of the first statement is welcome, a mereological reading of the second one would give rise to difficulties in Brentano’s framework. Indeed, “the sound belongs to the content of \(C_2\)” cannot mean “the sound is a part of \(C_2\),” for if the sound were a part of \(C_2\) then the real existence of \(C_2\) would entail the real existence of the sound. However, this is not the case: when I hallucinate the sound, my (non-veridical) hearing really exists, but the sound does not; \textit{a fortiori}, when I hallucinate the sound, my consciousness of the (non-veridical) hearing really exists, but the sound does not.

At this point we are urged to find a reading which does not lead us to conceive of the object of \(C_1\) as a part of \(C_2\). I think all we need is \textit{transitivity} (of consciousness): it does not entail mereological relations, but only \textit{intentional} ones. Letting \(xCy\) stand for “\(x\) is consciousness of \(y\),” we have:

\[
(\forall x)(\forall y)(\forall z)((xCy \land yCz) \rightarrow xCz)
\]

Thus, in stating that the object of \(C_1\) “belongs to the content” of \(C_2\), Brentano could have meant that the \textit{consciousness of the hearing}, being \textit{consciousness of the consciousness of the sound}, is also consciousness of the sound.
2.3 Interlude: the duplication argument

According to Textor, IT and CT are closely connected with the so-called duplication argument. This can be reconstructed as follows. Assume that C₁ and C₂ are distinct entities, and hence are two consciousnesses. For Brentano, (i) the sound is conscious only once, (ii) two consciousnesses have two objects, and (iii) the sound is conscious both in C₁ and C₂. Thus, one can argue as follows:

(i) The sound is conscious only once.
(ii) Two consciousnesses have two objects.
(iii) The sound is conscious both in C₁ and C₂.
(iv) C₁ and C₂ are two consciousnesses.
(v) ∴ The sound is conscious twice. [from (ii), (iii), and (iv)]

As can be seen, there is a contradiction between (i) and (v), and so (iv) is false by reductio. Textor argues that the denial of (iv) is the way round Brentano finds to avoid the duplication of the primary object (the sound). In an earlier article, Textor (2006, pp. 417–421) argued that CT is the positive way round that Brentano finds to avoid such a difficulty: C₁ is part of C₂; hence, so the argument goes, the sound is conscious only once. More recently, however, he (Textor 2017, p. 56) has argued that IT is what Brentano needs for solving the problem. The reason for Textor’s shift might be that he realized that CT maintains that C₁ and C₂ are distinct consciousnesses (the first one is a part of the second), though just one whole exists (namely C₂).

But is such an interpretation correct? It is not, I submit. Arguably, Brentano could accept all the premises of the so-called duplication argument. Let us start with (iii). As we know, this premise is a rewording of the second statement that seems to validate CT. It has been rightly observed (see Textor 2017, p. 56) that (iii) is a disputable premise, which as such is in need of further argument. Nevertheless, Brentano (1995a [1874], p. 94) takes it to be evident (eineleuchtend).

Now consider (ii) and (iv). In PES II Brentano asks himself the following question: in hearing the sound, are there many consciousnesses?¹² His reply is complex: if we want to determine the number of consciousnesses according to the number of mental phenomena, then the answer is negative; but if we want to determine the number of consciousnesses according to the number of objects, then the answer is positive. At this point he puts forwards two theses:

(T1) If there are many consciousnesses, then there are many objects.
(T2) If there are many objects, then there are many consciousnesses.

T1 is stated only implicitly. Brentano expressly contends that the conjunction of (iii) and (iv) engenders the duplication of the primary object. Why? Because many consciousnesses have many objects. Hence (ii) is a Brentanian premise.

On to T2. Strange as it may seem, it still complies with the double relation thesis: mental phenomena are not individuated by their objects, since one mental phenomenon (the hearing) has two objects (the sound and itself). By contrast, consciousnesses are individuated by their objects: if there are two objects, then there are two consciousnesses. A fortiori, if there are different objects, then there are different consciousnesses. This is the case of C₁ and C₂, and this is why Brentano cannot deny (iv). His attempt to solve the problem of duplication is not IT, but rather FT: he does not claim that C₁ and C₂ are identical; he claims that C₁ and C₂ are (distinct but) fused.¹³ Let us have a close look at this claim.

2.4 The fusion thesis

The statements which seem to validate FT¹⁴ are the following:

i. A “fusion” (Verschmelzung; Brentano 1995a [1874], pp. 100, 107) between the consciousness of the hearing and the consciousness of the sound subsists.

ii. Secondary consciousness “belongs to” (gehört mit) (Brentano 1995a [1874], p. 99, translation slightly modified) the mental phenomenon itself.

iii. Secondary consciousness “is given in” (Brentano 1995a [1874], pp. 100, 119, translation slightly modified) the mental phenomenon itself.

iv. Primary consciousness and secondary consciousness are parts of a unitary phenomenon.¹⁵

From FT it follows that a mental phenomenon is not a simple thing, for it contains a multiplicity of parts. Accordingly, C₁ and C₂ are said to be “partial phenomena” (Theilphänomene). From an exegetical point of view, FT seems to be the best candidate to express Brentano’s account of inner consciousness. Indeed, while IT and CT are mostly inferred from some (few!) statements by Brentano, FT is explicitly formulated and treated at length: chapter 4 of PES II is dedicated mainly to a systematic presentation of C₁ and C₂ as (real) parts of a mental phenomenon.
From a systematic point of view, the questions are basically two: whether FT avoids the duplication of the primary object, and whether FT entails an infinite regress.

Regarding the first question, I argue that if one assumes that (i) C₁ and C₂ are divisives of a mental phenomenon (i.e. FT), that (ii) the sound is conscious in both C₁ and C₂—which can be interpreted to mean that transitivity (of consciousness) holds—and that (iii) two consciousnesses have two objects, then the answer is no. Indeed, divisives are necessarily distinct entities. I conclude that Brentano’s account is still threatened by the problem of duplication.

As for the second question, Textor (2006, pp. 424–430; 2013, pp. 477–480) argues that FT is precisely what allows Brentano to avoid an infinite regress. According to Textor, the reason why Brentano’s account would not incur an infinite regress is that he denies what Textor calls Exclusivity, that is, the idea that C₂ is directed only at C₁. In fact, Brentano states that C₂ is directed at the mental phenomenon “in its totality” (seiner Totalität nach) (Brentano 1995a [1874], p. 100, translation slightly modified), that is, at a whole made up of (at least) C₁ and C₂, or in Textor’s notation, the object of C₂ is not C₁, but {C₁ + C₂}. Against Textor, I will argue that it is precisely because Brentano holds this thesis (which presupposes FT) that his account incurs an infinite regress.

3 Fundamentals of Brentano’s mereology of consciousness

In order to better understand FT (and CT), Brentano’s mereology, in particular his mereology of consciousness, has to be taken into account. In the second chapter of Descriptive Psychology (henceforth: DP), entitled “Elements of Consciousness,” the basic notion of mereology, namely, the notion of part, is not explicitly defined. However, we can find it indirectly by looking at the notion of modifying part (or part in a modified sense) (see Brentano 1995b [1887], pp. 28–30). For Brentano, x is a modifying part of y if and only if x is not properly (i.e. not really) in y; for example, the sound is a modifying part of the hearing. Thus, the following definition of (real) part can be derived: x is a part of y if and only if x is properly (i.e. really) in y. In my example, the hearing is a part of consciousness.

In chapter 2 of DP, Brentano distinguishes two kinds of part (see Brentano 1995b [1887], pp. 15–17, 23–24): (1) separable parts and (2) distinctional parts. Note that these parts are not parts in a physical sense (for they are parts in a descriptive sense), nor are they parts in an improper sense: if x is a separable part of y, then x is properly (i.e. really) in y, and if x is a distinctional part of y, then x is properly (i.e. really) in y.17
Separable parts. A part $x$ is separable (ablößbar) from a part $y$ if and only if $x$ can continue to exist in a whole even if $y$ ceases to exist in that whole. Brentano distinguishes two kinds of separability: (1.1) One-sided separability and (1.2) two-sided separability. A one-sided separability holds between parts $x$ and $y$ if and only if $x$ is separable from $y$ but $y$ is not separable from $x$; a two-sided separability holds between parts $x$ and $y$ if and only if $x$ is separable from $y$ and $y$ is separable from $x$. An example of (1.1) is the relationship between presenting and willing; an example of (1.2) is the relationship between seeing and hearing.

Distinctional parts. If $x$ does not have separable parts, then $x$ is an element. However, elements can be said to have further parts; Brentano calls these “distinctional parts” or “divisives.” Parts $x$ and $y$ are distinctional parts with respect to each other if and only if $x$ is not separable from $y$ and $y$ is not separable from $x$. As an example of divisives Brentano speaks of the two halves of an atom: in an atom we can distinguish (unterscheiden) one half from the other, but we cannot separate the first half from the second, and vice versa. There are two kinds of distinctional parts: (2.1) Mutually pervading parts and (2.2) logical parts (genus and species). Examples of (2.1) are, in visual sensation, spatial determination and quality, and in the judgement “There is a truth,” affirmative quality and evidence. Examples of (2.2) are colour and yellow, and seeing-colour and seeing-yellow.

Prima facie, distinctionality and separability mutually exclude one another, that is, it seems as if for every part $p$, $p$ is distinctional if and only if $p$ is not separable. However, Brentano’s definition of (2.2) complicates the relationship between (1) and (2), for he claims that a genus is “distinctionally separable” from the species. More precisely, in cases of (2.2) a one-sided distinctional separability holds. For example, colour is distinctionally separable from yellow, but yellow is not distinctionally separable from colour. The reason seems to be clear: a colour does not have to be specified as yellow, whereas yellow is necessarily a colour.

The matter becomes more complex if one looks at Brentano’s discussion of the relationship between $C_1$ and $C_2$ in chapter 2 of DP. There he claims that $C_1$ and $C_2$ are distinctional parts (of a mental phenomenon), but he specifies (see Brentano 1995b [1887], pp. 24–27):

(a) The connection between $C_1$ and $C_2$ is not a connection between mutually pervading parts.
(b) The connection between $C_1$ and $C_2$ is not a connection between logical parts.
The ground for asserting (a) is that while in the judgement “There is a truth,”’ affirmative quality and evidence have a relation to one and the same object (namely, the truth; see (2.1)), C₁ and C₂ have a relation to different objects (the sound and the hearing). The ground for asserting (b) is that, just as C₁ is not a genus with respect to C₂, so C₂ is not a genus with respect to C₁.

In discussing (a), Brentano claims that the relationship between C₁ and C₂ is similar to the one that holds between separable parts like seeing and hearing (see (1.2)). In fact, he claims that the relationship between C₁ and C₂ is similar to a relationship of two-sided separability! After tracing this similarity, which remains quite obscure, Brentano contrasts the two relationships in stating that while between seeing and hearing real separability holds, between C₁ and C₂ (only) distinctional separability holds. The notion of distinctional separability seems therefore to coincide with the notion of separability in an improper sense. While parts x and y are said to be separable parts with respect to each other if and only if x is really separable (i.e. separable in a proper sense) from y and y is really separable from x, parts x and y are said to be distinctional parts with respect to each other if and only if x is not really separable (i.e. separable in an improper sense) from y and y is not really separable from x.

We are now in a position to determine the mereological status of C₁ and C₂. Borrowing an expression from Kriegel (2018, pp. 87–93)—but rejecting his reading (see section 2.1 above)—one can say that C₁ and C₂ are real parts (of the mental phenomenon) which are separable only in thought.

4 Brentano and the infinite regress problem

At this stage, I want to decide whether Brentano faces the infinite regress problem and whether he is able to offer a solution to it. As I said, I distinguish two kinds of regress: external infinite regress and internal infinite regress. These two may be defined as follows:

External infinite regress. An infinite regress is external if and only if every member of it is distinct from every other, and between its members no part-whole relationship holds. Hence, if x and y are members of an external infinite regress, then x is not part of y nor is y part of x.

Internal infinite regress. An infinite regress is internal if and only if every member of it is distinct from every other, and between its members a part-whole relationship
holds. Hence, if \( x \) and \( y \) are members of an internal infinite regress, then either \( x \) is part of \( y \) or \( y \) is part of \( x \).

I should point out that Brentano does not make such a distinction. However, since he describes consciousness in mereological terms, a consideration of both regresses turns out to be unavoidable (see also Küng 1978, p. 173).

Here are the two premises which engender an external infinite regress (henceforth: R1):

(P1) Secondary consciousness is a mental phenomenon.
(P2) Every mental phenomenon is the object of a distinct mental phenomenon.

P1 can be rephrased as:

(P1*) Inner consciousness is a mental phenomenon.

Where P2 is meant to imply that between mental phenomena no part-whole relationships hold: \( M \) is not part of \( M' \) and \( M' \) is not part of \( M \). If we assume P1/P1* and P2, then R1 can be demonstrated as follows: (i) \( C_2 \) is a mental phenomenon \( M \); (ii) Every mental phenomenon is the object of a distinct mental phenomenon; (iii) \( C_3 \) (of \( C_2 \)) exists (from (i) and (ii)); (iv) \( C_3 \) is a mental phenomenon \( M' \); (v) \( C_4 \) (of \( C_3 \)) exists (from (ii) and (iv)); and so on ad infinitum. In other words, inner consciousness implies inner consciousness of inner consciousness, where the second inner consciousness is a consciousness that is external to the first. This is the kind of infinite regress for which higher-order theories are usually criticized.

Does Brentano accept the premises which engender R1? As for P1/P1*, it is not entirely clear whether Brentano would endorse it: on the one hand, in his framework the concept of mental phenomenon seems to be reserved to the act in its totality: when considering the hearing with all its parts, it seems that we are allowed to call mental phenomenon only the hearing as a whole. On the other hand, \( C_2 \) is described as a (partial) phenomenon, thus one might legitimately ask which kind of phenomenon \( C_2 \) is. It is very implausible that it is a physical phenomenon, for we are talking about consciousness; therefore, it seems that \( C_2 \) is a mental phenomenon (all phenomena being either mental or physical). Since it is disputable that P1/P1* is a Brentanian premise, the only way to assure us that Brentano does not incur R1 is to certify that he denies P2. This is the case: the double relation thesis allows him to stop this regress.
However, I argue that Brentano’s way of describing the infinite regress he wants to avoid (which in fact is R1) is not correct: indeed, in this case he speaks of an “infinite complexity” (Brentano 1995a [1874], p. 81), or more precisely, of an “infinite series of phenomena whose individual members become more and more complex, ad infinitum” (Brentano 1995a [1874], p. 94, translation slightly modified). As I will show, the sort of infinite regress described by Brentano (which I call internal infinite regress) is not entailed by P1/P1* and P2, but by other premises which in my view are endorsed by Brentano himself.

Here are the three premises which engender an internal infinite regress (henceforth R2):

(P3) Secondary consciousness is part of the mental phenomenon.19
(P4) Consciousness of x entails consciousness of (all of) the parts of x.
(P5) Consciousness of x is not identical to consciousness of a part of x.

P3 can be rephrased as:

(P3*) Inner consciousness is part of the mental phenomenon.

P4 could be rephrased as: If x is conscious and y is part of x, then y is conscious. P4 and P5 respectively entail:

(P4*) Consciousness of a mental phenomenon M entails consciousness of (all of) the parts of M.
(P5*) Inner consciousness of x is not identical to inner consciousness of a part of x.

If we assume P3*, P4*, and P5*, then R2 can be demonstrated as follows: (i) C2 is part of the mental phenomenon M; (ii) consciousness of M entails consciousness of (all of) the parts of M; (iii) inner consciousness of x is not identical to inner consciousness of a part of x; (iv) C3 (of C2) exists (from (i), (ii), and (iii)); (v) C3 is part of C2; (vi) C4 (of C3) exists (from (ii), (iii), and (iv)); and so on ad infinitum. In other words, inner consciousness implies inner consciousness of inner consciousness, where the second inner consciousness is a consciousness internal to the first.

One could question the passage from (i) and (ii) to (iii): why C3 (of C2) and not still C2 (of C3)? Let us reconstruct the argument. Here is the first set of premises: P3/P3* (C2 is part of the mental phenomenon M, from FT) and P4 (Consciousness of x entails consciousness of (all of) the parts of x), from which it follows that consciousness of M
entails consciousness of (all of) the parts of M (from P4) and consciousness of M entails consciousness of C₂ (from P3 and P4). Here C₂ stands for “consciousness of M,” “consciousness of C₂” stands for “consciousness of consciousness of M,” “consciousness of M” stands for “inner consciousness,” and “consciousness of consciousness of M” stands for “inner consciousness of inner consciousness.” The implicit premise says that consciousness of inner consciousness is inner consciousness. It is worth noting that up to this point there is no infinite regress.

Now the second set of premises: P3/P3* (C₂ is part of the mental phenomenon M) and P5 (consciousness of x is not identical to consciousness of a part of x). These premises entail that consciousness of M is not identical to consciousness of C₂. Since “consciousness of M” stands for C₂, it follows that C₂ is not identical to consciousness of C₂. Let us therefore write “consciousness of C₂” as C₃, and let us call C₂ first-order inner consciousness and C₃ second-order inner consciousness (recall that C₂ is consciousness of M, whereas C₃ is consciousness of a part of M). By FT, C₃ is part of C₂, which entails, by transitivity (of parthood), that C₃ is part of M. It then follows that C₃ entails consciousness of consciousness of C₂, and that C₃ is not identical to consciousness of consciousness of C₂, and so on. Therefore, every M has an infinite number of inner consciousnesses as its parts. More precisely: if we assume P1/P1*, then we face an infinite regress of mental phenomena; if we do not, then we still face an infinite regress of inner consciousnesses.

Should all the premises that engender R2 be considered part and parcel of the Brentanian outlook? Let me consider them one by one.

We have seen that P3 follows from FT, which seems to be the best candidate to express Brentano’s account of inner consciousness. Therefore, such a premise is surely a Brentanian premise. We may specify that C₂ is a real part (of the mental phenomenon) and say that every M will have an infinite number of real inner consciousnesses as its parts. All these consciousnesses are divisives, and as such separable only in thought.

As for P4, I argue that it can be taken to be a Brentanian premise as well. The sources for embracing this exegetical position are two. The first one is a passage from PES II: here Brentano declares that who “acknowledges” x, in so doing “acknowledges” each part of x.²⁰ The second one is a passage from DP, where the converse thesis is presented: it is argued that the denial of any of the parts of something would contradict the acknowledgement of the whole.²¹ However, it should be noted that this second passage is thicker than the first one: indeed, Brentano adds that the parts are “concomitantly acknowledged” (mitanerkannt) and expands on this point by saying that the fact
that one acknowledges all the parts of something does not imply that each part is “specifically” (ausdrücklich, für sich) or “in particular” (im Besonderen) acknowledged. One could claim that this latter statement is what makes P4 a non-Brentanian premise. I argue that such a claim would be an exegetical mistake. In this context, Brentano refers to the distinction between explicit consciousness and implicit consciousness—a distinction that in later texts will be refined (see Brentano 1995c [1911], p. 216, Brentano 1981 [1933], p. 117; Brandl 2013, p. 54). Consider an instance of the act of seeing: the consciousness of a red table is an explicit consciousness, whereas the consciousness of the red of the table is (only) an implicit consciousness. The table is specifically conscious, whereas the red is (only) concomitantly conscious. From this it does not follow that consciousness of \( x \) does not entail consciousness of (all of) the parts of \( x \); it only follows that (explicit) consciousness of \( x \) does not entail explicit consciousness of each part of \( x \).

I conclude that there is no reason to deny that P4 is a Brentanian premise: we only need to conceive of the mental phenomenon as specifically conscious and each inner consciousness contained in it as (only) concomitantly conscious.

So we come to the crucial premise of the argument, namely P5. Before deciding whether it could be considered a Brentanian premise, I would like to discuss Borsato’s (2009, pp. 52–55) position on this matter. Briefly, he denies that P5 is universally valid, that is, valid for every consciousness. He argues that a defender of Brentano could avoid R2 by resorting to Husserl’s concept of implicit consciousness. Borsato states that implicit consciousness is the consciousness through which a part of \( x \) is given to us while we explicitly direct ourselves to \( x \). For example, while we perceive a red ball, we explicitly direct ourselves to the (red) ball and the red is implicitly given to us. Borsato argues that in a case of implicit consciousness it is true that consciousness of \( x \) is identical to consciousness of a part of \( x \). He asks us to conceive of first-order inner consciousness (i.e. consciousness of M) as an explicit consciousness and second-order inner consciousness (i.e. consciousness of a part of M) as an implicit consciousness. Borsato’s reading of Husserl’s notion of implicit consciousness is exegetically and systematically disputable. Husserl rarely speaks of implicit consciousness, but more often of “implicit intention”—a synonym for partial intention (Partialintention) (see Husserl 1970, passim). A partial intention is an intention through which we implicitly intend a part of something. For example, in explicitly intending a red ball, we implicitly intend the red of the ball. If we explicitly intend the red of the ball, then a particular perception (Sonderwahrnehmung) arises. Husserl never states that the intention through which we explicitly intend \( x \) coincides with (i.e. is identical to) the intention through which we impli-
citly intend a part of $x$. Rather, he embraces a phenomenological version of the “Composition as Identity” thesis:

\[(PCI) \text{ Consciousness of } x \text{ is identical to consciousness of (all of) the parts of } x.\]

It is clear that PCI not only implies P4, but also that consciousness of (all of) the parts of $x$ entails consciousness of $x$. Suppose we perceive a chair which is composed of a seat and three legs. According to PCI, to perceive that chair is nothing more than to perceive that seat and those three legs. Hence, assuming that M is composed only of $C_1$ and $C_2$, PCI says that to perceive $M$ is identical to perceiving $C_1$ and $C_2$. By the same token, assuming that $M$ is composed of $C_1$ and an infinite series of inner consciousnesses, PCI says that to perceive $M$ is identical to perceiving $C_1$ and that series.

Let us come back to Brentano: does he endorse P5? I have to concede that such a thesis does not appear in the works of Brentano that I am considering here. Nevertheless, I argue that P5 results from the combination of two Brentano’s statements. The first one has already been quoted (see section 2.1 above): a part of $x$ cannot be identical to $x$. The second is in DP; it is as follows: for each part of the object there is a part of the mental phenomenon. In this regard, Brentano invites us to consider the act of seeing: we have to distinguish in it the (partial) consciousness of quality and the (partial) consciousness of spatial determination (see Brentano 1995b [1887], p. 104). These consciousnesses are distinctional parts of the act of seeing, and as such are distinct from the act of seeing itself. Now, just as the consciousness of quality (consciousness of a part of $x$), which is a part of the act of seeing, cannot be identical to the act of seeing (consciousness of $x$), second-order consciousness (consciousness of a part of $M$), which is a part of first-order consciousness (consciousness of $M$), cannot be identical to first-order consciousness. From this one can easily derive P5*. I conclude that FT does not entail R1, but does entail R2.

5 Concluding remarks

Let me briefly summarize my results. From the exegetical point of view, I believe I have shown that FT is the best candidate to express Brentano’s account of inner consciousness. I have substantiated this reading by examining Brentano’s mereology of consciousness. From the systematic point of view, I have distinguished two kinds of infinite regress, and I have argued that internal infinite regress turns out to be inherent to
Brentanian inner consciousness. Such a regress is created by three premises: inner consciousness is part of the mental phenomenon; consciousness of a mental phenomenon entails consciousness of (all of) the parts of it; inner consciousness of $x$ is not identical to inner consciousness of a part of $x$. I believe I have demonstrated that all of these premises are Brentanian. Along the way, I have also argued that FT does not allow Brentano to avoid another crucial problem, namely the duplication of the primary object.

However, a question is still open: does Brentano consider infinite regress as such to be something “intrinsically impossible and contrary to experience” (Brentano 1995a [1874], p. 81), or does he consider just external infinite regress to be so? Since he states something general—that is, something which concerns the notion of infinite regress as such—I am inclined to think that the first alternative is more plausible than the second.

Notes

1 See Brentano (1995a [1874], p. 79): “We have seen that no mental phenomenon exists which is not, in the sense indicated above, consciousness of an object. However, another question arises, namely, whether there are any mental phenomena which are not objects of consciousness. All mental phenomena are states of consciousness; but are all mental phenomena conscious, or might there also be unconscious mental acts?”

2 See Brentano (1995a [1874], p. 79 note): “We use the term ‘unconscious’ in two ways. First, in an active sense, speaking of a person who is not conscious of a thing; secondly, in a passive sense, speaking of a thing of which we are not conscious. In the first sense, the expression ‘unconscious consciousness’ would be a contradiction, but not in the second. It is in the latter sense that the term ‘unconscious’ is used here.”

3 In place of “consciousness,” Brentano speaks more often of “presentation” (Vorstellung). For the sake of terminological consistency in my exposition, I will always use “consciousness.” Note that primary consciousness and secondary consciousness are not defined by their objects. For example, the consciousness of the sound is called “primary” not because it is a consciousness of the sound. Primary and secondary consciousness are defined rather by the relation to their objects: primary consciousness is observation (Beobachtung), whereas secondary consciousness is not observation (see Brentano 1995a [1874], p. 99). In hearing the sound, the hearing cannot be observed. We can observe the hearing in remembering, but then it is the hearing that is observed, whereas the remembering cannot be observed. Again, we can observe the first remembering in a second remembering, but then the first remembering is observed, whereas the second remembering cannot be observed, and so on. Consequently, “primary” and “secondary” are relative designations: it can be that $x$ is a primary object with respect to $y$ while $x$ is a secondary object with respect to $z$.
In order to understand my arguments, one should bear in mind that in my framework, **Distinctness** (formally: \( x \neq y \)) is the negation of **Identity** (formally: \( x = y \)).

See, for example, Brentano (1995a [1874], pp. 98, 100, 119). Brentano’s source is Aristotle (Met. Λ.9), who writes: “It seems that knowing, perceiving, believing, and thinking are always of something else, but accessorially of themselves” (Φαίνεται δ’ ἄξι δ’ ἄλλου ἡ ἔπωτήμη καὶ ἡ ἀδύθης καὶ ἡ δόξα καὶ ἡ διάνοια, αὐτῆς δ’ ἐν παρέφην).

The name **IT** has been coined by Hossack (2002).

The name **CT** has been coined by Textor (2006).

See Brentano (1995a [1874], p. 98; translation slightly modified): “The presentation of the sound and the presentation of the presentation of the sound form a single mental phenomenon; it is only by considering it in its relation to two different objects, one of which is a physical phenomenon and the other a mental phenomenon, that we dismember it conceptually into two presentations. In the same mental phenomenon in which the sound is presented we simultaneously apprehend the mental phenomenon itself. What is more, we apprehend it in accordance with its dual nature insofar as it has the sound as content within it, and insofar as it has itself as content at the same time. We can say that the sound is the primary object of the act of hearing, and that the act of hearing itself is the secondary object.”

See Kriegel (2018, p. 92): “We might therefore say, doubtless somewhat impressionistically, that *qua regarded* the awareness and the awareness-of-awareness are different, even though in and of themselves they are identical.”

See Brentano (1995a [1874], p. 124): “And it is clear that such real identity never holds between our concurrent mental activities, and that it will never be found between the diverse aspects of the simplest mental acts which were differentiated earlier. […] [A] divisive, which I distinguish as a part in a real thing, cannot be called identical with this thing and hence with the other divisives which can be distinguished in it.”

The name **CT** has been coined by Textor (2006).

In fact, Brentano makes the hypothesis of **many and diverse** (mehrere und verschiedenartige) consciousnesses, that is, of consciousnesses which are distinguishable not only *numerically*, but also *qualitatively*; I believe, however, that numerical distinguishability is enough to make the argument.

See Brentano (1995a [1874], pp. 97–98; translation slightly modified): “Now the question arises, in such a case, do we have many and diverse presentations or only a single one? Before answering this question we must become clear about whether we want to determine the number and the variety of presentations according to the number and variety of objects, or according to the number of mental acts in which the objects are presented. On the first alternative it is clear that we must say that in the case
under consideration we would have many presentations and that they are of different kinds; so much so that one of them constitutes the content of another, while having a physical phenomenon as its own content. If this were true, the physical phenomenon must, to a certain extent, belong to the content of both of these presentations, to that of one as its explicit object, to that of the other as, so to speak, its implicit object. It would seem, therefore, as Aristotle also noted, to turn out that the physical phenomenon must be presented twice. Yet this is not the case. Rather, inner experience seems to prove undeniably that the presentation of the sound is connected with the presentation of the presentation of the sound in such a peculiarly intimate way that its being at the same time contributes innerly to the being of the other. 

14 The name FT has been coined by Kriegel (2018).

15 See Brentano (1995a [1874], pp. 120–121; translation slightly modified): “Our investigation has shown that wherever there is a mental activity there is a certain multiplicity and complexity. Even in the simplest mental state a double object is immanently present. […] But this lack of simplicity was not a lack of unity. The consciousness of the primary object and the consciousness of the secondary object are not each a phenomenon per se; rather, they are partial phenomena of one and the same unitary phenomenon. […] We interpreted them, and had to interpret them, as parts of a unified real being. […] That to which the primary and the diversified secondary consciousness belonged was one thing, but obviously not an utterly simple thing.” Kriegel’s (2018, p. 93) translation of Theilphänomene as “apparent parts” is entirely wrong, for it erroneously inverts the subject (Phänomene) and the attribute (Theil).

16 On Brentano’s mereology, see Baumgartner and Simons (1994) and Kriegel (2018, pp. 85–90).

17 See Brentano (1995b [1887], p. 18): “In the blue spot one must therefore distinguish a particularity of colour and a particularity of place. These particularities are thus really contained in it, [they] are distinctional parts of them.”

18 See Brentano (1995b [1887], p. 27; translation slightly modified): “The sensing of the colour and the concomitant sensing of this sensing are directed towards different objects. The present case is, in this respect, similar to those separable parts which we discerned earlier in the mental domain, like, e.g., seeing and hearing […]. Whereas the separation of the parts considered there can only be real, the parts considered here can only be separated distinctionally. This is why, having referred to the former as really separable mental parts, it was probably not wholly inappropriate to call the latter inseparable (distinctional) ones.”

19 While Brentano denies that C1 is part of a sound, inferring from this that an unconscious sound is not something contradictory (see Brentano 1995a [1874], p. 71), he claims that C2 is part of the hearing. It seems therefore that an unconscious hearing is something contradictory. However—apparently linking unthinkability with contradictority—he also states that while C2 without C1 is a contradiction, C1 without C2 is not unthinkable (undenkbar). Hence, it seems that an unconscious C2 is something contradictory, whereas an unconscious C1 is not. In Brentanian terms, the unthinkability of x without y is proof of the union of x and y; however, this does not entail that y is unthinkable without x. C1 could be to C2 as will is to presentation (see (1.1)). On the unity between primary and secondary consciousness, see also Fréchette (2012, p. 920).
20 See Brentano (1995a [1874], p. 161; translation slightly modified): “By way of further clarification, I call attention to the fact that when someone acknowledges a whole, in so doing he acknowledges each part of the whole as well.”

21 See Brentano (1995b [1887], p. 36; translation slightly modified): “And if the acknowledged thing is a whole with parts, then the parts are all, in a certain manner, concomitantly acknowledged. The denial of any of them would contradict the acknowledgement of the whole. Yet the individual part is, for this reason, by no means acknowledged [―] let alone judged [―] specifically (by itself) and in particular.”

22 See Husserl (2004, p. 148; my translation): “However, the object itself must be identical to the entire complex of its determinations. […] Then, to perceive the object means to perceive all these determinations.”

23 See Brentano (1995b [1887], p. 104; translation slightly modified): “For, corresponding to the parts of the intentional objects, there are parts of the mental acts directed at them.”

References


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