

Brentano and Kafka

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For we are like tree trunks in the snow. In appearance they lie sleekly and a little push should be enough to set them rolling. No, it can't be done, for they are firmly wedded to the ground. But see, even that is only appearance.¹

§ 1. The Louvre Circle

There is a narrow thread in the vast literature on Kafka which pertains to Kafka's *knowledge of philosophy* and more precisely to the fruitfulness of attempts to interpret Kafka's fictional writings in the light of some of the main ideas of *Franz Brentano*. Such attempts have been roundly dismissed, not least by Max Brod, who denied the role of all theory in Kafka's writings (Kafka 'spoke in images because he thought in images'). As Arnold Heidsieck has thoroughly documented in his recent study of the intellectual context of Kafka's work, however, Kafka's fictional writings are

informed by ... academic and public debates during the first decade of the twentieth century on physiology; perceptual, cognitive and linguistic psychology; the philosophy of mind and language; positive law and natural-law theory; criminal procedure; ethics; and religion. (Heidsieck 1994, pp. 2f.)

Kafka became apprised of and to some degree involved in such debates not least through his school-friends (including Hugo Bergmann and Emil Utitz), through the courses he attended in philosophy at the Charles University, courses given *inter alia* by Brentano's students Anton Marty and Christian von Ehrenfels, and through his three-year membership of a discussion-group organized by orthodox adherents of the Brentanian philosophy in Prague. Heidsieck's book 'surveys philosophical theorems that were either intensely contended or opposed' by the Brentanists in Prague, and he attempts to show how 'Kafka embeds them almost serially in his developing themes and paradigms' (*op. cit.*, p. 48). Here I shall concentrate on two such 'philosophical theorems': Brentano's doctrine of intentionality, and Brentano's account of ethical judgment.

1. "Die Bäume", Kafka 1970, p. 19 (trans. by W. and E. Muir, Kafka 1971, p. 382).

As a result of the work of intellectual historians of recent decades we now have what can claim to be a more or less adequate understanding of that complex cultural entity which was *fin-de-siècle* Vienna.² The outburst of intellectual energy which is encountered in the works of Weininger, Wittgenstein, Kraus, Mahler, Schoenberg, Loos, Klimt, Hofmannsthal, Musil, Broch, Schnitzler and Freud was, on the one hand, a product of the quite peculiar cross-fertilization which characterized Austrian intellectual life.³ But it was also, at least in part, a product of a wider political contagion which marked the later Habsburg Empire. The ideas of the liberal enlightenment which had sustained the intellectuals of Europe through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had shown themselves, in Austria at least, to be unworkable.⁴ And the collapse of the liberal faith or, more generally, of the faith in politics as a mechanism for the improvement of humanity, contributed to a characteristic introvertedness on the part of Austrian intellectuals, a turning away from society which was also a turning inward to the nether regions of the isolated individual self.

The present essay is devoted not to Vienna but to Prague, where the same political pressures were at work, and to the work of Franz Kafka and to the Prague Brentanist movement with which Kafka, in his youth, had enjoyed a brief contact. A systematic introvertedness is of course evident on almost every page of Kafka's writings. It makes itself felt also, however, in the work of the Brentanists, for whom psychology – a descriptive science of the structures of the individual consciousness – serves as the fundamental discipline, providing the ultimate theoretical foundation not only for logic and ethics but also for the disciplines of politics and law.⁵ Kafka entered the German University in Prague in November 1901, and his five years of study consisted predominantly in never more than halfhearted attendance at courses in law. Originally he had intended to study philosophy, and in fact a certain number of classes in philosophy were compulsory for law students at that time. Yet it seems that we can rule out the suggestion that Kafka attended these courses merely in order to satisfy the university regulations. We have convincing evidence of the fact that Kafka, at that time and for a number of years afterwards, exhibited a positive interest in philosophy – and specifically in Brentanian

2. See especially the writings of Carl E. Schorske, above all his 1960/61 und 1967 (reprinted in Schorske 1980).

3. This was in part a reflection of the cross-disciplinary nature of university studies as these had evolved in Central Europe and which Kafka's own education illustrates in a particularly striking manner. On Austrian polymathy in general see Johnston 1972, chs. 10 ff, and 19 ff., and Grassl and Smith 1986. It is no accident that the unity of science movement (Neurath, *et al.* 1938) should have had its birthplace in Vienna.

4. Cf. Schorske, *op. cit.* For a defence of the Schorske thesis against its critics (above all Johnston in his 1972 and elsewhere), see Nyíri 1982.

5. Cf. Brentano 192, I. 3, and 1934.

philosophy – for its own sake.⁶ He attended also courses in chemistry,⁷ in legal history, in forensic medicine, in the history of art and architecture, in German literature, and in economics and political theory.

That Brentano's influence was felt especially strongly in Prague turns in part on the fact that, for various personal and religious reasons, he had been treated rather badly by the authorities in Vienna. His students however were able to obtain posts in universities elsewhere in Austria, and to propagate Brentanian philosophy to the extent that it acquired the status of a semi-official philosophy of the Empire. Brentano's students included, beside Marty and Ehrenfels,⁸ also Freud, Thomas Masaryk (subsequently founder and first president of the erstwhile Czechoslovak Republic), Meinong, Husserl, Stumpf and Twardowski. The most orthodox Brentanists congregated around Marty in Prague, whose circle included also other former students of Brentano, such as Oskar Kraus and Alfred Kastil. The Prague Brentanists took up the task of developing and disseminating Brentano's doctrines with an almost religious fervour. A group of them met regularly in the Café Louvre (now a sex shop) on the Ferdinandstrasse, for 'training' in Brentanian modes of thought and of philosophical discussion and argument. Hugo Bergmann, Emil Utitz and Oskar Pollak, three close school-friends of Kafka,⁹ were all initiated into this circle, and Bergmann, in his turn, seems to have recruited Kafka himself. There is evidence testifying to the fact that, at least between the years 1903 and 1906, Kafka frequently attended meetings of what was called the 'inner circle of Brentanists'.¹⁰

As Utitz has described it, the Louvre Circle was a community of thinkers

6. It was almost certainly under the pressure of financial considerations that Kafka elected, finally, to take his degree in law; cf. Wagenbach 1958, especially p. 242, where there is reprinted a list of the members of Kafka's final year class at the German State Gymnasium in Prague.

7. Wagenbach, *op. cit.*, esp. pp. 106–14 and Neesen 1972.

8. I have provided a brief account of Ehrenfels – the titular father of Gestalt psychology – as an appendix to an earlier version of the present essay (Smith 1981). Ehrenfels remained a familiar figure in Prague for many years. See e. g. Kafka's diary entry for 4 February 1912: 'Amusing scene when Prof. Ehrenfels, who grows more and more handsome and who – with his bald head sharply outlined against the light in a curve that is puffed out at the top, his hands pressed together, with his full voice, which he modulates like a musical instrument, and a confident smile at the meeting – declares himself in favour of mixed races.' We know that even as late as 1913 Kafka was still attending Ehrenfels' seminars: see the diary entry for 21 October 1913. On Ehrenfels thought and influence see Fabian (ed.) 1986 and Ash 1995. On Brentano's influence in general see Smith 1994. On Brentano and Freud see Heaton 1981.

9. Bergmann went on to make several important contributions to philosophy, especially on the work of Bolzano and Brentano; Utitz became a distinguished aesthetician, and Pollak a historian of art. It was Pollak who received and criticized Kafka's earliest literary experiments; see Bezzel 1975, Binder 1980, and the references there given.

10. Wagenbach, *op. cit.*; Neesen, *op. cit.*; Binder 1966, pp. 58 ff.; Bokhove 1981.

in a common struggle, who would meet frequently for evenings of endless discussion. Franz Brentano, of course, was not himself present. But his powerful shadow fell upon every utterance, whether this expressed a correct interpretation of his teachings or some objection to them.¹¹

Max Brod, too, was associated with the Louvre Circle. We can deduce that he began to attend its meetings some time after Kafka himself, and probably before their close friendship had established itself. But Brod seems never properly to have belonged to the inner circle of Brentanists, and he was in fact ceremoniously excluded from all dealings with the group after publishing in a Berlin literary magazine a short story which included a caricature of religious Brentanianism. He himself has provided a description of his expulsion:

As I entered the back room of the Café Louvre everybody was gathered together in a talkative mood, and a copy of *Gegenwart* which had come out shortly before the meeting lay on the table. I had arrived with Kafka. It was Emil Utitz who first made the accusation ... which was debated for some time. A series of deliberations followed, as if what were taking place were something like a student's court of honour. ... And I had no one who came to my defence, though all the participants had by then [October 1905] known me for two years. Suddenly one of them took my side – Kafka. Normally he was so quiet in company, giving the impression of being almost apathetic ... – But now Kafka whispered across to me ... that it would be best if we both left, and quit the Brentano circle for ever. And this we did.¹²

Kafka himself, however, shortly after this event, resumed contact with at least some members of the Louvre Circle. Two months later he, together with Pollak, Utitz and Bergmann's mother-in-law Berta Fanta, signed a dedication to a book on theoretical psychology¹³ which was presented to Hugo Bergmann 'in memory of our common struggles' on the occasion of the latter's birthday.¹⁴

11. Utitz 1954, cited by Wagenbach, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

12. Brod 1960, p. 260, quoted by Neesen, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

13. The work was Busse 1903, a study of psychophysics (essentially a survey of contemporary treatments of the mind-body problem).

14. Wagenbach, *op. cit.*, p. 216, n. 426. Berta Fanta had established in her home a regular salon for Prague intellectuals which was frequented by many of the members of the Louvre Circle. Among the guests at the Fanta gatherings were not only Kafka, Bergmann, Oskar Kraus, and Ehrenfels, but also Albert Einstein, who was for a time professor of physics at Prague, Philipp Frank, another physicist and subsequently member of the Vienna Circle, and the mathematician Gerhard Kowalewski, who has described the Fanta evenings in his autobiography (1950). It was not only philosophical issues which were discussed; Brod, for example, tells us that on successive Fanta evenings through the winter of one year a certain Herr Hopf, a professor in Prague and a friend of Einstein, gave a course combining an account of relativity theory on the one hand with an introduction to Freudian psychoanalysis on the other (Wagenbach, *op. cit.*, p. 174).

It was Kafka's biographer Klaus Wagenbach who first attempted to show in detail that not only Brentanian psychology but also Brentanian ethics contributed at least something to determining both the form and the content of Kafka's literary work; that through his participation in the Louvre evenings Kafka acquired techniques which contributed something to the development of the peculiar mode of portrayal of consciousness which is so characteristic a feature of his literary experiments, and that the philosophical psychology underlying this process of representation of conscious experience is a version of the descriptive psychology of Brentano.¹⁵ As Neesen, in his excellent book on Kafka and Brentano, has pointed out: 'It would be inexplicable if Kafka had, over a long period, attended meetings of a circle of philosophers whose subject-matter was of no interest to him.'¹⁶

Wagenbach's and Neesen's arguments have been subjected to sceptical scrutiny, particularly by Hartmut Binder, who points out that even at those points where Kafka's writings suggest a terminological or conceptual affinity with Brentanian ideas, the deviations from Brentano are often more significant than the similarities. Binder is ready to accept the biographical evidence of a more or less sustained contact between Kafka and the Brentanists, but he argues that many of those aspects of Kafka's mode of writing and thinking which might seem to admit of an explanation in terms of a Brentanian influence can more readily be accounted for on the basis of other, quite independent considerations.¹⁷ Kafka and Brentano are, as we have already seen, representatives of a much wider movement of thought within central Europe at the turn of the century. They manifest a common subjectivism, a concern with the inner life of the individual subject at the expense of those aspects of human reality which have their foundation in the outer life of society. It is thus to be predicted that many of the intellectual strands of what we find in Kafka can be traced back to several independent sources. With the publication of Heidsieck's work, however, which offers a wealth of additional supporting textual and biographical detail to the original Wagenbach-Neesen argument, a scepticism of the sort evinced by Binder has suffered a heavy blow. What is still needed is a detailed treatment of the relevant philosophical ideas, and this is what shall be attempted here

15. The Wagenbach-Neesen interpretation has been defended also by Harder 1962. Other works on Kafka and European philosophy, for example the works of Emrich and Bense, Demetz and Pondrom, listed below, almost completely ignore the peculiarly Brentanian background in Prague and its quite specific relation to Kafka. Emrich and Bense content themselves with certain parallels between Kafka's thought and the Heideggerian *Fundamentalontologie*, and Demetz's essay is an interesting but far too brief account of the specifically Jewish background of Bohemian intellectuals such as Husserl, Freud and Kafka. Even Pondrom, who presents a number of useful parallels between Kafka and Brentano's greatest student Edmund Husserl, centring around the notion of *putting the world on trial*, misses completely Kafka's relation to Brentano.

16. *Op. cit.*, p. 34.

17. Binder 1966, pp. 56–91; 1980, vol. I, pp. 287f *et passim*. Binder's account is to some degree however flawed by the fact that he shows little understanding of or sympathy for the Brentanian philosophy.

§ 2. The Evidence of Inner Perception.

The philosophy courses for which Kafka enrolled in his first year at the University were as follows:

Winter Semester 1901/02	Ehrenfels: Praktische Philosophie (4 hrs/week)
Summer Semester 1902	Ehrenfels: Ästhetik des musikalischen Dramas (1 hr/week)
Summer Semester 1902	Marty: Grundfragen der deskriptiven Psychologie (3 hrs/week)

By ‘descriptive psychology’ Marty understood the psychology of his teacher Brentano as this is set forth first of all in his *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* and now in Brentano’s lecture notes published under the title *Deskriptive Psychologie*.¹⁸ Brentano begins by advancing a fundamental distinction between two sorts of phenomena, which he calls physical and psychical phenomena respectively. Examples of physical phenomena are:

a colour, a figure, a landscape which I see, a chord which I hear, warmth, cold, an odour which I sense, as well as similar formations appearing in the imagination.¹⁹

Psychical or mental phenomena, in contrast, are simply our mental acts themselves:

the hearing of a sound, the seeing of a coloured object, feeling warmth or cold, as well as similar states of the imagination ... the thinking of a general concept (if such a thing actually does occur), ... every judgment, every recollection, every expectation, every inference, every conviction or belief, anger, love, hate, desire, act of will, intention, astonishment, admiration, contempt, and so on.

Brentano now distinguishes inner from outer *perceptions* by reference to their objects: acts of inner perception are those perceptions that have psychical phenomena as their objects, acts of outer perception those that have physical phenomena. But this leaves unclear what precisely it might mean to ‘perceive’ a psychical phenomenon. Brentano did not intend thereby, as we shall make clear below, anything like an *introspection* of one’s own inner states of consciousness. He wished, rather, to draw attention to the fact that every act of consciousness is bound up with its own intrinsic self-consciousness, that a mental event or state which did not meet this condition would not be a ‘consciousness’ at all. It is not as if – as Brentano’s terminology of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ perception may unfortunately suggest – this element of self-consciousness is conceived as an additional act, which would exist in the mind somehow alongside the original outer consciousness. It is, rather, a merely abstractly distinguishable moment or constituent part of the original consciousness, a moment of a type that can of necessity exist only as embedded within a larger circumcluding whole of the given sort. The act-moment of inner perception might best be conceived as an act of *living through* its object (the

18. See Brentano 1982. For a transcript of lectures given by Marty under this title see Marek and Smith 1987.

19. Brentano 1924, vol. I, pp. 111f (pp. 79f of English edition).

corresponding psychical phenomenon), without any exterior *target* object of the type which is typically possessed by acts of both outer perception and (if these exist) of introspection.²⁰

Brentano's thesis of the primacy of inner perception, now, is a claim to the effect that it is the inner life, the inner perception of psychical phenomena, which can alone yield certain knowledge. The only objects of which we can have an absolutely secure apprehension are, as he conceives it, the acts and states of our own consciousness. Of these alone can we assert with an absolutely evident knowledge that they are in reality as they appear in consciousness. A consequence of this is that our outer perceptions, that is, our experiences of physical phenomena, *may always be deceptive*. This thesis represents a form of Cartesianism, in that Brentano's arguments for the dubitability of outer perception rest on the same kind of intuitions as do Descartes' discussions of perceptual illusion in his *Meditations*. Brentano's claims for inner perception as a source of absolutely secure knowledge, on the other hand, recall Descartes' claims on behalf of those truths impervious to systematic doubt which he believed himself to have isolated.²¹

When we are perceiving outer phenomena, we cannot know with absolute evidence that the object of our perception is as it seems – we could, e.g., be hallucinating. When living through a particular state of consciousness, however, we *can* know with absolute evidence that this state of consciousness exists, and that it is structured in such and such a way. Illusions and hallucinations are, Brentano claimed, alien to the world of inner perception when this is properly understood. What he means by this can I think be explained as follows: absolute evidence is obtained only if a judgment and that which is judged, i.e. for Brentano, that object whose existence is affirmed, are somehow united in a single whole which is available to consciousness in such a way that the correctness of the judgment can be grasped directly. Such a unity is impossible for judgments of outer perception, since there the objects intended are given as being transcendent to the act of judging itself. Consider, however, judgments of reflexive self-awareness (a thinking exists, a remembering exists, a visual image exists, and so on). Judgmental contents of this sort are, as we have seen, merely abstractly isolable moments of more inclusive act-wholes; they are immanent to the corresponding act of judging. Thus the desired kind of unity between judgment and that which is judged is here already to hand: our experiences of psychical phenomena are already of themselves experiences having the character of absolute evidence. We can be deluded in supposing that there is a pattern of red and green (an object of outer perception) in our visual field; but we cannot be deluded in supposing that we are undergoing an experience of seeming to see a pattern of red and green. This experience constitutes an object of inner perception the existence of which is given with absolute evidence in the very experience itself and the concept of delusion can here gain no foothold.²²

20. See Küng 1978.

21. Cf. Küng, *op. cit.*

22. A useful interpretation of Brentano's arguments here is given by Chisholm in his 1981: see especially Chisholm's discussions of empirical certainty (which corresponds broadly to what we have here called absolute evidence).

What are the consequences of Brentano's doctrine for our understanding of the external world and of our knowledge of this world? Note that Brentano himself does not deny that objects of outer perception exist outside our consciousness. Nor does he deny that they are as they appear to us. He asserts only that we have no unconditioned evidence that they do so exist. The external world, our apprehension of which is built up over time on the basis of our consciousness of constellations of physical phenomena, is reduced to something that is merely probable, as contrasted with the absolute certainty of the existence of objects of inner perception. And where Brentano was called upon to give his best estimate as to the nature of this external world, he turned to physics, to the world of energy fields, of atoms and molecules; in relation to the normal world of tables and chairs, people and insects, he embraced a decidedly sceptical attitude.

A close contact with Brentanian philosophy would thus have been conducive to the adoption of a sceptical attitude in relation to this ordinary world. The Brentanian sceptic will find, like Descartes, that he can countenance modes of experience in which the external reality projected by consciousness is blurred or malignantly deformed in the light of the standards of correctness assumed in our ordinary everyday experience. And as we shall see in more detail below, such variant modes of experience, and the peculiar *plasticity of the world* which is their correlate, form a constantly recurring theme in Kafka's writings.

§ 3. Oblique Consciousness

When Gregor Samsa wakes up in the morning he doesn't just feel like a noxious insect, he *is* a noxious insect: that is to say, everything in his outer world is such as to lend support to his belief that this is his new form. For the external world which is normally taken for granted there has been substituted a quite different world, having peculiar qualities. At the same time, however, Kafka/Samsa's *inner* reality is seen to have hard and firm outlines which are normally unnoticed. Moreover, Kafka/Samsa's immobility, his inability to engage in interactions with the human beings around him, means that more than ever he is thrust into the position of the dispassionate observer, the empirical psychologist engaged in the business of noticing and recording the play of psychical phenomena.

From the perspective of our accepted standards of reality, a cleft threatens to open up in the fabric of Samsa's experience, due to the fact that the mode of appearance of the objects of his outer world, including that of his own physical body, does not gear into the reality which seems continually to threaten to break through whenever he has contacts with (what we think of as) external reality. This cleft is however prevented from making itself felt by continually shifting reinterpretations on Samsa's part of the data which comes in.

From the point of view of the Brentanian sceptic a cleft of this kind is potentially capable of appearing in the experiences of every individual; for most of us it is as if the cleft were securely and, as we assume, rightly papered over, through the inertial force of commonsensical assumptions concerning external reality. Our unquestioning acceptance of these assumptions consists, in effect, in this: that at least in principle every datum

which emanates from the outer world will be given precedence over our inner expectations, over connections amongst mental contents whose motivation derives exclusively from internal factors.

It is extremely difficult to give a clear account of this ‘cleft’, since the characteristic features of the real and the subjective have been switched around by Brentano: it is the inner world alone which now truly has the character of being real; the outer world of common sense, which we normally take as our standard of reality, has lost all its former claims to absoluteness – even though at the same time it is not simply denied that it exists.

Kafka however seems to have succeeded, at least in part, in representing the cleft in literary form. He does not appeal directly to some process of introspection or direct observation of mental experiences. The very idea of such a process is, within the Brentanian framework, a spurious one. Observation or attention, mental processes involving our deliberately directing our gaze towards an object, can, of course arise in the field of outer perception. But Brentano argues that direct, attentive self-observation of one’s own anger, say, or of any other psychic phenomenon, is impossible. For as soon as our attention were turned to such phenomena, as soon as we were truly living in the gaze of observation, the original phenomena would have disappeared: we would no longer be properly angry or afraid, but rather attentive.

The attempt at introspection thus begins to look very much like the attempt of a dog to catch its own tail. Whenever we suppose that our own psychic states have become the objects of our attention – that we have succeeded in the attempt to observe them – we are, Brentano argues, involved in a delusion, which derives from our having mistakenly assumed that psychical phenomena can play the role of objects in the same way as physical phenomena, objects which will stand still, as it were, as our attention is focused on them.

Kafka, too, was aware of this impossibility of a non-delusory self-observation:

How miserable is my self-knowledge when compared, say, to my knowledge of my room ... And why? There is no observation of the inner world as there is of the outer. At least descriptive psychology is probably on the whole an anthropomorphism, a gnawing away at the limits. The inner world can only be lived, it cannot be described. – Psychology is the description of the reflection of the earthly world in the surface of heaven or, more correctly, the description of a reflection which we who are absorbed completely by the earth think up for ourselves, for no reflection takes place at all, we see only earth wherever we may look.²³

And then again in his diary for 9 December 1913:

Hatred of active introspection. Explanation of one’s soul, such as yesterday I was so, and for this reason; today I am so, and for this reason. It is not true, not for this reason and not for that reason, and therefore also not so and so. To put up with oneself calmly, without being precipitate, to live as one must, not to chase one’s tail like a dog.

And again (10 December 1913):

23. Kafka 1953, p. 72 (my trans.). Compare Heidsieck 1994, p. 64.

It is never possible to take note of and evaluate all the circumstances that influence the mood of the moment, are even at work within it, and finally are at work in the evaluation, hence it is false to say that I felt resolute yesterday, that I am in despair today. Such differentiations only prove that one desires to influence oneself, and, as far removed from oneself as possible, hidden behind prejudices and fantasies, temporarily to create an artificial life, as sometimes someone in the corner of a tavern, sufficiently concealed behind a small glass of whisky, entirely alone with himself, entertains himself with nothing but false, unprovable images and dreams.

Inner perception, then, is resolutely to be distinguished from any kind of introspection. To see the relevance of this, let us recall Brentano's definition of inner perception as a consciousness of psychical phenomena. Such phenomena he demarcates into three classes, which are seen as exhausting all mental experience: *presentations, judgments, and phenomena of love and hate*.²⁴ Thus psychical phenomena are either presentations of landscapes, of colour- und tone-complexes, and so on; or they are judgments (*that* such and such an object exists); or they are phenomena of love and hate (a category which includes, for Brentano, all emotions and feelings, including feelings of will); or they are combinations of these. It is the category of judgments that most clearly illustrates what is involved in inner perception. In judging something, e.g. that this pattern of red and green exists, we have before us first of all certain physical phenomena, the objects of our external perception (in this case the red and green data in our visual field). But then also we are *aware* of what is taking place in our mind; we are conscious – *obliquely, as it were* – of the judgment itself, a certain psychical phenomenon. Similarly, in seeing directly before us the pattern itself, we are conscious, obliquely, of our seeing of the pattern. And it is this *oblique consciousness*, present in all mental experiences whatsoever, which is what Brentano means by inner perception.

Let us suppose that we now wish to convey the data of inner perception in written form. Recall that inner perceptions are always, of their nature, dependent moments of more inclusive act-wholes which comprise also moments of outer perception; the oblique consciousness of a mental act presupposes also that there is some direct consciousness of the external target of the act. Hence it is impossible to convey the data of inner perception except in association with an appropriate framework of outer perceptions. We might at first wish to appeal simply to ordinary experience for such a framework, but this would be to reinforce the established inertial habits and tendencies of mind; we would become once more absorbed in the outer world, and this would place almost insuperable obstacles in the way of our bringing to prominence the data of the inner life. For the attentions of the reader would in such circumstances follow their natural course (would be directed, in effect, to the external unfolding of the plot). It would seem, however, that the peculiar forms and structures of inner consciousness might begin to be made accessible, be brought to representation, if the mind of the reader could somehow be *deflected* from his settled interest in that which is normally unfolding in a represented normal outer world. This can be achieved I suggest, if the expected order of the outer world is presented matter-of-factly,

24. Brentano, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, Book II, ch. 6.

in a step-by-step fashion, but is in some way *disrupted*. The consciousness of the reader is thereby diverted, connivingly, into the inner world, but without his clearly realizing that this is what is happening.

Consider, for example, the way in which our attentions become bound up with the inner life of the narrator in the following passage:

I walked on, unperturbed. But since, as a pedestrian, I dreaded the effort of climbing the mountainous road, I let it become gradually flatter, let it slope down into a valley in the distance. The stones vanished at my will and the wind disappeared.

I walked at a brisk pace and since I was on my way down I raised my head, stiffened my body, and crossed my arms behind my head. Because I love pinewoods I went through woods of this kind, and since I like gazing silently up at the stars, the stars appeared slowly in the sky, as is their wont. I saw only a few fleecy clouds which a wind, blowing just at their height, pulled through the air, to the astonishment of the pedestrian.

Opposite and at some distance from my road, probably separated from it by a river as well, I caused to rise an enormously high mountain whose plateau, overgrown with brushwood, bordered on the sky. I would see quite clearly the little ramifications of the highest branches and their movements. This sight, ordinary as it may be, made me so happy that I, as a small bird on a twig of those distant scrubby bushes, forgot to let the moon come up. It lay already behind the mountain, no doubt angry at the delay.²⁵

The narrative of Kafka's writings is, to a striking extent, a matter of the portrayal of experience from the point of view of the main protagonist. But Kafka almost never resorts to the expression of any kind of active introspection. His portrayal of an oblique consciousness of the inner world is achieved, rather, by way of some contrast with an expected or somehow typical order in external reality, or of some breakdown of the expected intermeshing of the inner and the outer. The character of dogged literalism of Kafka's writings seems therefore to be a device to catch the reader off his guard when the expectations of a natural or reasonable order in the external world which it arouses are upset. Kafka's depictions of bare reality are never superfluous, never introduced for merely ornamental purposes. But nor, either, does he take great pains to achieve any particular social or psychological realism in his descriptions, especially in regard to his subsidiary protagonists. The depiction of external reality serves rather the predominant end of allowing some particular aspect of oblique consciousness to show forth.

§ 4. On Our Knowledge of Right and Wrong

Brentano's reputation in Austria in the first decades of this century, outside the narrow circle of philosophers and theoretical psychologists, was principally as an ethical philosopher. His *On the Origins of our Knowledge of Right and Wrong* was as familiar in Vienna as was Moore's *Principia Ethica* (which it in some ways

25. "Beschreibung eines Kampfes", Kafka 1970, pp. 207 f. (Eng. trans. 1971, p. 22.)

resembles²⁶) amongst intellectuals in Bloomsbury or Cambridge. This popularity was partly a reflection of the fact that Brentano succeeded, in that work, in capturing the tenor of the world view shared by many central European intellectuals of his day, and hence it would be surprising if we did not find at least echoes of Brentano's ethical ideas in Kafka's writings.

As already pointed out, three fundamental categories of psychical phenomena are recognized by Brentano: presentations, judgments, and phenomena of love and hate. Every conscious action is accompanied by or is fused together with one or more of these phenomena: for example an action of beheading may be accompanied by an inner perception on the part of the executioner of his own disgust, etc. Now it is easily supposed that it is to the last of these categories that ethical questions will relate. The criteria which have been offered by philosophers in terms of which conduct should be apprehended as ethically correct or incorrect have tended to consist in assertions to the effect that ethical correctness is to be determined in the light of certain considerations pertaining to feelings and emotions: that action is good which is felt to be good, or which is accompanied by a good will, or which is conducive to happiness, etc.

The most important of these doctrines is the doctrine of utilitarianism, which asserts that the ethical rightness or wrongness of an action is measured directly in terms of the pleasure or pain which are its consequences. This conception of the ethical is of a piece with the doctrines of positivistic naturalism that had come to predominate amongst philosophers in the nineteenth century, doctrines which rested on a rejection of the possibility of absolute evidence in the ethical, as in all other spheres. The predominance of positivism in the German-speaking world was brought to an end at the turn of the century by Husserl and the neo-Kantians, but it received one of its earliest challenges from Brentano's work on ethics and more specifically from his doctrine of the ethical centrality of judgment.

Brentano's belief in the possibility of absolute evidence derived from his conception of the implications of the existence of certain variations in the quality of evidence in general, and thus also in the quality of the mental acts which are the carriers of evidence. Consider, for example, in relation to the simplest category of psychical phenomena – the category of presentations – the fact that we can hear or remember or imagine a tone or melody more or less clearly, more or less completely, more or less vividly, and so on. In relation to each of the given types of presentation there are obvious and undeniable variations in quality of the associated evidence. While these variations may depend in part upon native ability (good hearing, for example), they may also depend upon acquired habits or skills (on various forms of training).

Variations in the quality of evidence are equally familiar in the sphere of judgment. Thus we may be aware, on the one hand, that a particular belief which we have held for many years rests merely on authority or on custom, on information inadequately checked, or on an emotion or feeling whose grounds have never been

26. Moore's Preface contains the following passage: 'When this book had been already completed, I found, in Brentano's "Origin of our Knowledge of Right and Wrong", opinions far more closely resembling my own, than those of any other writer with whom I am acquainted.' (pp. xf.). Cf. also Moore's review of Brentano's work, published in 1903.

explicitly thought through. On the other hand we may be aware that a belief rests on factual data which we have subjected to the most thorough checks, or that it rests on immediate evidence (the evidence of inner perception), either directly or via deductive steps which themselves rest on immediate evidence. The idea of absolute certainty, of the greatest possible evidence of a judgment – which has nothing to do with the *feelings* of certainty by which a judgment may be accompanied – is now obtained by considering, on the basis of an examination of all possible axes of variation in quality of evidence, that kind of judgment which would, in suitably propitious circumstances, exhibit the maximum conceivable evidence along each such axis.

Brentano wished to defend the thesis that a judgment's character of being capable of absolute evidence is something objective. This thesis Brentano would have interpreted as something non-controversial. For although some of the axes of variation which we have considered rest on the presence or absence of subjective features (for example strength of emotional commitment), this presence or absence itself is not in its turn something subjective. The character of certainty is objective also in that it does not rest on the particular distribution of dispositions to check one's premises, to examine arguments, etc., across a given population, nor upon the techniques of theory construction, etc., in existence at any given stage. That a judgment has the potentiality for absolute evidence or certainty is something that pertains to the judgment alone, and would remain the case even if a corresponding insight on the part of judging subjects were never in fact achieved.

Another way of expressing the fact that a judgment has, in itself, the capacity for being executed with absolute evidence is to say that the judgment is *true*. For Brentano, the only judgments whose character of absolute evidence is capable of being realized by thinking subjects such as human beings are judgments relating to psychical phenomena – but this need not imply that these are the only judgments which are true.²⁷

There is, now, an analogue in the sphere of phenomena of love and hate to the phenomenon of experienced variations in quality of evidence in the sphere of judgments: phenomena of love and hate, of approval and disapproval, too, may be executed with a greater or lesser degree of clarity and distinctness, may to a greater or lesser extent be clouded by alien or conflicting elements. Thus we can isolate an ethical analogue of the notion of absolute evidence – a notion of an act of love, for example, carried out in such a way as to partake of the highest possible clarity, immediacy, etc. Whether acts ever do exhibit this character as a matter of fact is not here at issue: we are concerned merely to establish the coherence of the notion and the consistency of the picture of the ethical world which it dictates. The ethical analogue of *truth* is the quality of *correctness* hereby determined: those actions are ethically correct which rest, or which could in principle rest, on acts of love or of approval partaking of the given character of maximal purity. The phenomenon of correct love thus yields an ultimate foundation for the edifice of ethical knowledge (for the edifice of my ethical knowledge about the rightness or wrongness of my own actions).

27. From the assumption that only judgments relating to psychical phenomena were true it would follow, of course, that the world of external objects simply did not exist.

The range of actions whose evident character of goodness is yielded in an immediate fashion by this criterion of correctness may well be very slight indeed (may be confined to examples such as: achieve knowledge of the truth, encourage friendliness, bring about the best within the widest area you are capable of influencing). There is clearly no possibility of manufacturing anything like a pair of ethical spectacles which would enable us to grasp immediately the degree of ethical correctness of an action in those highly complex circumstances where ethical problems normally arise. How, then, if at all, is the range of Brentanian ethics to be extended from such simple truisms to the level where it can cope with full-blooded ethical dilemmas in the day-to-day world?

We note, first of all, that the status of complex ethical problems is no different in principle from that of correspondingly complex factual problems. It may be only in relation to a comparatively small number of scientific judgments that a truly adequate evidence is ever achieved: the day-to-day application of science to the material world rests on the development of habitual practices rooted only partially in this evidential basis. The serviceability of these expedients masks the fact that in the development of our knowledge of the factual world there is, at any given stage, a threshold beyond which no evident judgments can be achieved. And what applies to the sphere of factual judgment applies also, Brentano argues, to the ethical sphere. Here, too, the continuous need for resolution of complex problems (as faced, for example, by physicians, insurance claim assessors, judges and political officials), has led to the evolution of complex networks of rules of thumb on different levels and to the gradual entrenchment of associated customs and conventions, so that the framework of law as a whole can be said to constitute, from one point of view, a slowly evolving instrument for the pragmatic resolution of ethical dilemmas in society. The fact that expedients of this kind have to be accepted in the sphere of ethical practice should not be taken to imply that it is not proper to consider how the threshold of evidence might in principle be extended. Nor, still more importantly, does it sanction the assumption that the resolution of ethical problems is – as the positivists believed – merely a matter of convention. Brentano's ethical theory is more than anything else an affirmation of the objectivity of ethical value and of the existence of (perhaps factually undiscoverable) intrinsically optimal resolutions of *all* ethical dilemmas. Just as a proposition is, in itself, true or false, independently of our recognition of its truth-value, so an action is ethically correct or incorrect (or a determinate mixture of the two) irrespective of our apprehension of its moral value.

§ 5. The Inner Tribunal

We can now determine more precisely the role played by judgment, and specifically by evident judgment, in the ethical sphere. An action is ethically correct if it could in principle rest upon acts of love or of approval partaking of the character of maximal purity. Now even where it is impossible to establish any direct link between, say, an action directed towards a loved object and a judgment of the correctness of the underlying act of love, it may yet be possible to verify the correctness of the given action by indirect means, namely by chains of (evident) judgments (judgments relating to the psychical phenomena of the subject involved), subject to

precisely the criteria of sufficient attestation, clarity, etc., established above. But then the processes which are involved in certifying the correctness of one's actions, in *passing judgment* upon oneself – processes involving the gathering and sorting of relevant data of inner perception, the testing of conclusions, etc. – turn the inner life of the ethical individual into something like a court of law.

There is, if one will, a strain of radical inner-directed rigorism that is implied by the Brentanian approach to ethics, and here Wagenbach sees a quite specific influence on Kafka's later writings: "The influence of the Brentano circle ... can hardly be underestimated, especially as an element in the development of his later ethical rigorism founded on a kind of judgmental necromancy (*Urteilmagie*)" (*op. cit.*, p. 116).

As already noted, the generation of Austrian intellectuals which succeeded Brentano manifests an acute scepticism in relation to the liberal belief in the power of politics to bring about the good. Many members of this generation embraced ethical doctrines of a resolutely individualistic sort. Kafka's protagonists, too, are turned in upon themselves, to the extent that they perceive the machinery of social and political order with somnambulant incomprehension. Yet their thoughts and actions are not played out within a space which is ethically empty. They are characterized, rather, by an ever-present ethical confusion (guilt). Where, as above all in *The Trial*, a serious attempt is made to break free of this confusion, to substitute light for ethical darkness, this can be seen to involve just those internal processes which, in the Brentanian framework, transform the mind of the individual concerned into what amounts to a court of law .

§ 6. The Case of Joseph K.

The ethically confused individual can resolve his interior dilemma, can lead an ethically contented life, only if he can reach the point where he can pass judgment over himself. This is possible, only if he knows the extent of his physical and mental capacities, and if he can apprehend completely the extent of his own limitations and is blessed with the patience not to want to break through these limitations in a self-delusory way: "Complete knowledge of oneself. To be able to seize the whole of one's abilities like a little ball. To accept the greatest decline as something familiar and so still remain elastic within it." (Diary entry for 8 April 1912) Or, as Neesen puts it (*op. cit.*, p. 143): "Only in stillness, in the consciousness of one's own possibilities and in patient modesty, can one lead a contented life."

Kafka's narrative in *The Trial* straddles the boundary between law and psychology, above all by exploiting the ambiguity between judgment as mental act and as legal process. This ambiguity is never resolved, because our everyday conception of the boundary between the inner and the outer (social) world has been suspended. A certain set of psychic phenomena – particularly those bound up with K.'s constant need for self-justification – can be seen to determine a reality of their own, projected upon or merged with or folded into ordinary external reality. As Gregor Samsa's conception of himself and of his body determine his bodily shape and behaviour in the hybrid 'outside world' which he has created, so K.'s continual trial within himself is also a real trial in the outer world in which K. imagines he is living. Since this world is, in whole or in part,

a fabrication – ‘All is imaginary – family, office, friends, the street, all imaginary’²⁸ – so the trial, too, is never more than partially real (it can attain its sanction only from the mental acts of K. himself) .

We are told at the very beginning of Kafka’s text that the authorities standing in judgment over K. do not make their inquiries in order to discover guilt. Rather, ‘as it is stated in the law’, they merely ‘follow in the path of guilt’. K. is arrested; but it is made clear that his arrest should stand in the way of neither his profession nor of his everyday mode of living. As K. searches for the court he has at first no idea where he is supposed to go. But then he suddenly remembers the statement that the court would ‘follow in the path of guilt’, and he sees that from this that ‘it immediately followed that the investigation room had to lie at the top of the flight of steps that he had chosen by accident’. The court, therefore, is there, where K. himself has ordained that it should be, as if he were carrying it about with him as part of his personal baggage. And as he is sitting in the court-room he realizes that the trial itself is a trial only if he recognizes it as such.

Any kind of defence before the court is not actually permitted, but only tolerated – although there is some dispute even concerning that. And in general the proceedings are not only closed to the public, but also to the defendant. For it is not the evidence which is actually brought forward in the court that is decisive, but that which is passed about in the deliberation rooms and in adjoining corridors. There is some probability that the innocence of the defendant may play a role in any acquittal which may actually take place – though an acquittal is of course something which rarely happens, and it is never to be achieved by somehow influencing the judge. When it does happen, however, not only the summons and all the other documents of the trial are to be destroyed, but also the acquittal and indeed the trial itself are to pass completely out of existence.

In the end K. is told that he himself must come to a decision whether or not to recognize the court. ‘The court doesn’t want anything of you. It will admit you if you come, and it will set you free if you go.’ And as K. is being led to his execution he knows that he himself must be his own executioner. Who, then, as K. himself asks, was the judge, whom he had never seen, and where was the court, at which up to the very end he had never arrived? The answer, after all that has been said, is clear. The judge, the court and the trial itself are projections of K.’s own inner experience, projections from the world of inner perception out into the world of external affairs. And at least one aspect of the shaping force behind this projection is K.’s conviction that morally correct action demands of him that he somehow attain to an absolutely evident judgment. Because he thinks that this is something which he can achieve only as the result of some deliberative process, a process which would presuppose a whole series of investigations and deliberations, and because, as he is dimly aware, he is himself incapable of realizing such a process in a straightforward way (is incapable of being honest with himself), he brings about a series of events having the nature of an obscurely perceived legal trial which would do the job for him. ‘Since one becomes clear about oneself by means of a judgment, and since this judgment must be passed in the centre of the self, this self itself becomes a kind of tribunal.’ (Neesen, *op. cit.*, p. 205). ‘[S]ince the court is inside Josef K. himself, it becomes understandable that it need not interrupt the ordinary

28. Diary entry for 21 October 1921.

course of his life. And for the same reason the court is everywhere where K. searches for it, and also where he does not expect it.' (*loc. cit.*)

Where, as in the Austria of the later Habsburg Empire, respect for society as moral arbiter has been called into question, this role must be appropriated by the *conscience* of the individual subject. Where ethical reward and ethical punishment can no longer be regarded as events in the world, they must be conceived as residing *in the action itself*. Guilt and punishment are not two separate things; they are one and identical. And then it is possible to draw at least this amount of reassurance: that there is no criminal who truly escapes the punishment which is his due. The philosophical foundations of this introverted world have been described by Brentano and – still more radically – by Weininger and Wittgenstein. But it is Kafka who has shown most clearly what it might be like to live in such a world, a world in which the individual subject is driven into himself to such an extent that the belief in an external order of reality slowly begins to appear as so much superstition.

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