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Brentano on the Individuation of Mental Acts

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Abstract

This paper aims to present and evaluate Brentano’s account of the individuation of mental acts. In his early works, Brentano assimilated mental acts to tropes; however, he encountered difficulties in explaining their individuation, since the usual solutions for the individuation of tropes were not readily applicable to his theory of mental acts. In a later period, Brentano introduced into his psychology what he called the “soul”, and this allowed him to explain the individuation of mental acts. Finally, after his “reistic” turn, he excluded mental acts from his ontology, for he rejected *abstracta* of any kind, including abstract particulars, and admitted only things, or *res* (in Latin), that is, concrete particulars; in his late philosophy, there are no “thinkings”, but only “thinkers”. However, he still needed to explain what individuates different thinkers, and this was again the soul. In the conclusion, the paper critically compares the different theoretical options considered by Brentano.

Introduction

If you and I think of a given thing, it seems that each of us has a *particular* mental act. But what makes each of our acts the individual act it is? One might be tempted to answer: for your act, it is that it belongs to you, while for mine, it is that it belongs to me. Such an answer, however, might lead one to think that there is something in addition to our mental acts to be posited, namely, two subjects, you and me. But are subjects necessarily required here? Are they the only option that we have for the individuation of our mental acts? Franz Brentano

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struggled with these questions throughout his work. This paper aims to present and evaluate the various options that he considered.

Brentano is famous for introducing the concept of intentionality into contemporary discussion, claiming that our mental acts exhibit a specific sort of “aboutness”, a “directedness” towards objects² – or rather, he reintroduced it, for he borrowed this notion from Aristotle and the Scholastics (Brentano 1924). It has been pointed out that Brentano tied his philosophy of mind closely to his ontology, and that he thus developed an “ontology of mind” (Mulligan and Smith 1985). Indeed, he maintains that mental acts, since they are part of reality, are subject to the same basic ontological rules that govern all other real things. Following an initially Aristotelian point of view, Brentano thought that the “categories” which apply to beings in general – that is, substance, quality, quantity, relation, action, passion, etc. – also apply to mental entities, and he struggled with the question whether mental acts are qualities, relations, actions, or passions (1933 and 1992–1993). Moreover, he divided these acts in three highest genera – presentations, judgments, and emotions – and in turn divided these genera into species, e.g. sensory, imaginary and conceptual presentation, which could be further divided into lower species; e.g. sensation is divided into sight, hearing, etc. (Kriegel 2018). Among the themes that he discussed and which were intimately connected to ontological issues one finds, as noted above, that of the individuation of mental acts. Brentano thought that the lowest species of mental acts are further individuated when mental acts concretely exist; that is, your mental acts and mine are distinct individual entities, and there must be something that explains this distinction. This is the theme that I will explore.³

In the first part of the paper, I will mention two general strategies for the individuation of mental acts, namely, through the object and the content, and will explain why Brentano thinks that these are bad options. In the second part, I will present Brentano’s view on the individuation of mental acts. As I will show, Brentano had two theories. First, he had a trope

² In this paper, I speak of “mental acts” in a broad sense, to include both mental occurrences and states, as well as both active and passive processes.

³ Thus, when Brentano wonders what accounts for the “individuation” of mental acts, he looks for the feature which explains their individuality strictly speaking. The word “individuation” is sometimes used in another sense in the philosophy of mind. One finds it, notably, in the expression “individuation of the senses”: in that case, the question is about determining the various sorts of sensation, e.g. seeing, hearing, etc. (see Matthen 2015). What Brentano wants to do, however, is not so much to establish the *sorts* of mental act there are, but to go “lower” so to speak: he asks what accounts for the fact that our acts are nonetheless distinct individual entities when you and I have two mental acts of the same sort, e.g. of seeing, and even acts of seeing directed towards the same object, e.g. a given red thing.

account of mental acts. He defended the trope account from 1874, in his *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, until around 1900. As I will try to show, however, and with the help of some notions drawn from contemporary ontology, it is not clear how exactly he could account for the individuation of his tropes. Second, in around 1900 in a text called *Von der Substanz* (as well as in the undated *Von der Seele*), Brentano included in his philosophy of mind what he called a “soul” in order to explain how mental acts are individuated. In addition, I will say a few words about his very late theory, which he defended from 1904 until his death in 1917. It is mainly presented in the (posthumous) *Kategorienlehre*, in which the soul no longer individuates *mental acts*, which for Brentano are abstract entities, but *thinkers*, that is, *concrete* things, since the late Brentano excluded all abstract entities from his ontology. In the conclusion, I will briefly come back to the various options defended by Brentano and critically compare them.

1. Can Objects or Contents Individuate Mental Acts? Brentano’s Negative Answer

What individuates our mental acts? One might be tempted to think that this question should be answered by looking at the object of mental acts, that is, that at which our mental acts are intentionally directed. However, I will briefly present some arguments which show why some philosophers are reluctant to rely on the object in their account of the individuation of mental acts. Brentano is one of them, and thus a brief consideration of these questions seems to be a prerequisite for discussion of his views.

Could the object be responsible for the individuation of a mental act? Note that if the object individuates *all* mental acts, it should be the case that all mental acts are intentional; this point is controversial among philosophers, since some treat certain emotions as non-intentional (e.g. Searle 1983). But Brentano (1924) does hold that all mental acts are intentional (for a presentation of his views, see Massin 2017). If this position is accepted, it still seems hard to individuate mental acts via their objects, even if the object is itself a particular. Obviously, you and I can simultaneously think of the same thing, as when, for example, we look at a particular horse galloping in a meadow; but then, even if the horse we are looking at is a particular entity, it seems that we still share something, namely, “looking at this particular horse”. Or at least this is a point that Brentano seems to defend, for one can read in a posthumous text (1954: 217–218) that the individuation of a mental act cannot be

looked for on the side of the object, given that two people can think of the same thing with the same sort of mental act (e.g. seeing).⁴

One might oppose to this that the binary act-object model of intentionality is insufficient. What if we were to hold that we are not just directed towards bare objects, but towards objects via such and such an aspect – that is, towards objects via, say, a certain “content”? Such a ternary model of intentionality is quite common among so-called “intentionalists” or “representationalists” (Crane 2009). Wouldn’t such a theory of intentionality, which admits contents in addition to objects, allow for individuation by precisely the content?

Interestingly, Brentano accepted some sort of content in his account of intentionality, more precisely, what are called “intentional objects”, which were understood as mind-dependent correlates towards which mental acts are intentionally directed; for example, the act of seeing-red is directed towards the intentional object seen-red (1982: 21, 26–27). Brentano later abandoned his theory of intentional objects, since he was unhappy with the philosophical consequences of the acceptance of mind-dependent objects (1925: 133–138). Be that as it may, these “intentional objects” seem not be adequate as an explanation of how mental acts are individuated. Indeed, Brentano holds that these objects “co-appear” and “co-disappear” when their corresponding mental acts come into existence or cease to exist. But this seems to imply that it is the mental acts on which these objects ontologically depend that are responsible for their individuation. So intentional objects would not be very useful for our purpose.⁵

But still, couldn’t one say that the content could indeed individuate mental acts, depending on what you mean by “content”? The discussion is complicated by the fact that the ternary model of intentionality, which adds contents to the act-object distinction, comes in many variants; that is, the term “content” can mean various things. To be sure, if a content is an entity that itself depends on a mental act, as it is for Brentano, it seems that it cannot account for the individuation of mental acts. Similarly, if what one means by “content” is a

⁴ I say “seems to defend” because I wish to remain cautious here: although I take this idea to be Brentanian in spirit, the text that I quote was edited by Alfred Kastil and Franziska Mayer-Hillebrand, who were not very reliable as editors, since they often rewrote manuscripts to adapt them to the views that Brentano defended in the final years of his life. Ideally, all of Kastil and Mayer-Hillebrand’s editions should be compared with the original manuscripts, though it is not always easy to identify the sources they used. For a defence of their unorthodox editorial practice, see Mayer-Hillebrand 1952 and 1963.

⁵ I follow the standard interpretation of the early Brentano, according to which he was identifying “intentional objects” with mind-dependent “correlates” (see Chrudzinski 2001; for a different reading, where correlates and intentional objects are distinct entities, see Antonelli 2001 and Sauer 2006).

Fregean sense, then obviously two people can think about one and the same object via one and the same content or sense; nor in that case can contents individuate mental acts. However, if you treat contents as “perceptual perspectives”, that is, as points of view caused by perceptual objects (as in Husserl 1984), then couldn’t contents indeed individuate mental acts? After all, you and I, given our bodily condition, could never have the same perceptual perspective on something at the same time, and so our acts would be individuated by their contents, provided they include a temporal dimension. Note that this might even lead to a differentialist account of the individuation of mental acts: one could, for example, accept Fregean senses for conceptual and propositional thought, while maintaining that perception has as its content something like a perceptual perspective. One could thus individuate perception via its content, but not conceptual or propositional thinking, for which another solution will then have to be found.

However, such an account of individuation seems to be contingent: as noted above, it relies on our bodily conditions, which implies possible alternative scenarios – for example, that of an artificial eye connected to two neuronal systems, which would thus produce one and the same perspective for both.⁶ This makes it hard even for perceptual perspectives to explain the individuation of mental acts. One option, so it seems, would be to say that this feature is primitive. Another would be to introduce a psychical subject; this, as we will see, is Brentano’s favoured explanation for the individuation of mental acts.

2. Brentano’s Own View

2.1. *The trope account*

What, then, is Brentano’s own view on the individuation of mental acts? Interestingly, he has two different accounts. First, from 1874 until around 1900, he thinks that mental acts are tropes, that is, abstract particulars, which come without any subject, but he struggles with their individuation. Then, from around 1900 to 1904, he holds that mental acts owe their individuation to a subject to which they belong as properties.

In his *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, first published in 1874, Brentano initiates a research program in the philosophy of mind based on a first-person analysis of our mental life. Thus, the “empirical standpoint” that he wants to adopt has nothing to do with an injunction to undertake psychological experimentation in the laboratory; rather, it means that when we do philosophy of mind, we should rely on what we find in our experience grasped

⁶ I thank Benjamin Schnieder for this example.

via reflexive intentionality, or what Brentano calls “inner perception”. But what do we see from the point of view of inner perception? According to the Brentano of the *Psychologie*, we have no access to something like a self, a soul, or a psychological subject. What we instead find are mental acts of various kinds, e.g. perceiving, thinking, judging, etc. For Brentano, at that time, we should therefore practise a “psychology without a soul” (1924: 16), and focus on these mental acts and the various ways they relate to each other.⁷

Now, one might legitimately ask what the individuating feature of mental acts is. Intuitively, it seems that I have my individual mental life, and you have yours. Interestingly, Brentano has an argument in favour of the thesis that our mental acts are individuated: he holds that our mental life is given to us via “inner perception”, which is an acquaintance, or an “intuition” (*Anschauung*), and that intuition is always directed at individual objects, in contrast to conceptual thought, which is directed at general objects (Brentano LS1b: 29018–29019). But what then is the individuator of mental acts? As indicated above, for Brentano this can neither be the object nor the content (or “intentional object”) of the act. Nor can it be the soul, since in this period Brentano did not admit the soul into his philosophy of mind. But what is it, if anything? To my knowledge, unfortunately, the answer to this question is not clearly found in the texts written at the time of the *Psychologie*. However, this does not mean that there are no solutions available. What I propose to do is to take Brentano’s ontology of that period, try to establish how exactly he understands mental acts, and then look at contemporary ontology, in order to see what options are available to him for the individuation of mental acts.⁸

It is often assumed that Brentano, at the time when he wrote his *Psychologie*, was a trope theorist (see Chrudzimski 2004). Indeed, he accepted what he called “properties” (*Eigenschaften*), e.g. “blackness”. He described these properties as *abstracta*: they are metaphysical parts – not physical parts – of objects, ontologically inseparable from their objects – in contrast to physical parts – and they explain the object being this way or that way. *Abstracta* are *irrealia*, or unreal entities, as opposed to “*realia*”. The latter are “things”, or

⁷ His source for the expression is Friedrich-Albert Lange, a nineteenth-century German philosopher who wrote a history of materialism (1873/1875). As made clear by Textor (2017: 133), the absence of a soul in the *Psychologie* is not just a matter of methodology. That is, Brentano does not simply say that the soul is not given to us from an “empirical standpoint”, but makes substantial metaphysical claims about the issue, notably the following: “it is a fiction to which no reality corresponds, or whose existence could not possibly be proved, even if it did exist” (1924: 15–16; transl. Rancurello, Terrell, McAlister).

⁸ Note that I will assume some standard positions defended in contemporary philosophy, notably on the individuation of tropes. I do not mean this discussion to be a contribution to contemporary ontology.

(from the Latin) *res*, that is, concrete particulars, e.g. Socrates. They are causally efficacious and can be acted upon. By contrast, *irrealia*, which also exist, are causally inert and impassive. Among them, Brentano includes entities of various sorts, such as states of affairs, collectives, *possibilia*, etc., as well as *abstracta*.⁹ (See Brentano 2013, which was written around 1900, that is, later than the *Psychologie*, but many elements of which also hold for the earlier period; for this chronology, and more generally on Brentano's ontology, I follow Chrudzimski 2004.)

Brentano's talk of properties recalls Williams's example of the "reddening" of the lollipop, which is famous in contemporary discussion on tropes (1953): the "reddening" of a lollipop is a "thin part" of the lollipop and not detachable, unlike the stick, which is a "gross part" and detachable. Brentano's distinction between metaphysical and physical parts seems to overlap Williams's distinction between "thin part" and "gross part". Now, Williams's thin parts are "tropes". However, whereas the blackness example indeed suggests that Brentano accepts *abstracta* in his ontology, it is not yet clear that they are abstract *particulars*. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to think that Brentano is a trope theorist. Indeed, he is clearly an enemy of universals, since he explicitly rejects both Platonic universals, which are supposed to exist independently of particulars, and Aristotelian universals, which are supposed to exist together with particulars (see 2011: 34 and 1930: 74). For him, all properties are particulars. In other words, he accepts abstract particulars, that is, tropes, and thus has a trope-only theory of properties.¹⁰ But then, are his mental acts tropes? It seems so, since there are no other options available (see also Mulligan 2004).

Let us then ask: How exactly does Brentano individuate his mental acts? As I said, I know of no text where he explicitly tackles the issue. What I propose to do then is to take the most widespread theories of the individuation of tropes in contemporary philosophy and see whether they might help in the present context. In the contemporary literature, there are three main accounts of the individuation of tropes: individuation via the object, individuation via space-time, and primitive individuation (Maurin 2014). The theory of individuation via the object, that is, that of which the trope is a property, is not much accepted among contemporary philosophers. One reason for this is that trope theorists hold that tropes must be

⁹ Brentano's use of the word "abstract" here does not overlap with the most widespread meaning in contemporary philosophy, namely that of atemporality (for more on abstract objects in contemporary philosophy, see Rosen 2017). However, as it will be clear from what follows, it has some affinities with the way the word is used by D.C. Williams.

¹⁰ This discussion of Brentano's ontology, including the comparison with contemporary accounts of the individuation of tropes, draws on and develops elements found in Taieb 2017.

simple; that is, the qualitative aspect of the trope and its individuating aspect should not have ontologically distinct “grounds” in the trope. (This is especially developed in Maurin 2002, whom I am following here.) Otherwise, so they argue, either the qualitative aspect would be a universal, or it would be a second individual, in which case a single trope would be individuated twice (Mertz 2004: 101). One way to put this is to say that for any qualitative feature to be a trope, it must be *intrinsically* individuated. *Mutatis mutandis*, if a trope were individuated by some sort of underlying object of which it is a property, then it would not be an intrinsically individuated qualitative feature, but rather would have a qualitative part resembling a universal, which owes its individuation to the particular which bears it (this is pointed out by Moreland 2001: 59, among others). In other words, object individuation makes tropes “disguised universals”.

Another reason for rejecting the object theory of individuation is that many trope theorists tend to explain objects by appeal to tropes: they take objects to be nothing other than interrelated, or “compresent” tropes (Maurin 2014). Since objects are nothing more than bundles of tropes, they cannot be responsible for the individuation of tropes.¹¹ Thus, as Maurin summarizes it (2014):

[...] although some of the things trope theorists have said may make it sound as if they endorse OI [i.e. object individuation], no trope theorist has come out “in public” to state that she does.

The most common options are the two others, namely, spatio-temporal individuation and primitive individuation. Those who accept individuation through spatio-temporality should still respect simplicity. Indeed, one should not hold “that place and the quality present at that place are distinct beings, one the particularizer and the other a universal”, for this

¹¹ The way tropes constitute objects can be manifold. Simons (1994) suggests that different layers in a bundle should be distinguished: there are some tropes linked via necessary relations of compresence and which thus constitute the substantial core of the object, while some tropes are connected to this core via contingent relations of compresence and which are thus seen as accidental properties. Here one could perhaps hold that the accidental tropes are individuated by their “object”, understood as the core; but since the core itself is also made of tropes, there is no object individuation in the final analysis. Note, moreover, that all the discussion here is compatible with the thesis that at the level of ordinary language, people might individuate tropes via their objects. (On the fact that object individuation is crucial for “our acquisition of the conceptual framework of particularised properties”, see Schnieder 2006a: 410.) The discussion above is about tropes taken in themselves, not in relation to ordinary language, common sense, or other relativizing factors.

would obviously no longer be a trope(-only) ontology; rather, one should say “that ‘quality-at-a-place’ is itself a single, particular, reality” (Campbell 1981: 483).

Let us turn to our third theoretical option, namely, primitive individuation. This theory says that tropes are qualitative features which are individuated from the start, so to speak. In other words, there is no need to ask what feature or entity provides them with their individuality. Primitive individuation respects simplicity, inasmuch as it holds precisely that tropes as qualitative features are individuated by themselves. However, it does not respect Leibniz’s principle of indiscernibles, in its metaphysical interpretation (Maurin 2002). According to this principle, qualitative identity implies numerical identity, and vice versa. Now, in the primitive individuation account, qualitatively identical tropes (exactly identical) can still be numerically distinct, and no qualitative difference is needed to explain this (obviously).

Let us come back to Brentano. How does he individuate his mental acts? Since he thinks that mental acts are not borne by an underlying subject, the object-individuation theory seems to be excluded for him. Furthermore, he accepts the principle of indiscernibles, in its metaphysical understanding (see 1992–1993: 261, where he mentions the principle as holding for things themselves, and not merely for our knowledge of them); hence, primitive individuation seems to be excluded as well. What about spatio-temporality? From the point of view of inner perception, mental acts do not appear to us as spatial. Does this mean that they are in fact not spatial? Inspired by Descartes, Brentano holds that inner perception is infallible (see 1924: 28–29, among others). Prima facie, this seems to allow us to say that mental acts are not spatial, given that they do not appear as such to inner perception. However, even if Brentano thinks that inner perception is always correct, he adds that we might fail to notice some elements given to us in our inner perception; this would explain why philosophers have debated for such a long time the nature of the various sorts of mental act and the way they are related to each other (1982: 31–65). Applying this to mental acts, Brentano holds that it might not be ruled out that they are spatial, though we might be unable to notice it (Brentano 1954: 221–222).¹²

However, Brentano is a mind-body dualist and thinks that mental acts are non-extended. His dualism is based on the irreducibility of intentionality: intentionality, according

¹² Again, this is a quote from an edition by Kastil and Mayer-Hillebrand. Note, however, that in the table of contents of the unwritten parts of his *Psychologie*, Brentano already mentions the inner perception argument, and notes that “it confuses not-perceiving and perceiving that [something is] not” (quoted and translated in Rollinger 2011: 292).

to him, is “the mark of the mental”, that is, a specific feature which is found in all mental acts and of which all physical phenomena are deprived (Tassone 2012: 196–204). All physical phenomena are extended, whereas all mental acts are non-extended. Apparently, what motivated Brentano to defend the non-extension of the mind is to allow for the immortality of the soul, or more generally of our mental life, before his admission of the soul (in the trope account of mental acts, our mental life seems to be best understood as a succession of mental acts partly overlapping in time). He wanted the soul, or the mental life, to be imperishable, and hence immaterial, which entails that it should be non-extended.¹³ His account of the immortality of the mind, in turn, was apparently based on theological arguments.¹⁴ At any rate, what is clear is that mental acts, for Brentano, are not spatial. But spatio-temporality minus spatiality is not a good individuator of mental acts, for it is possible for both you and me to be thinking of x at time t .

One way to still use spatiality in the individuation of mental acts would be to hold that the mind is connected to space via its relation to the body. This would allow one to say that my mental act of thinking of x at time t happens where I am, while yours happens where you are, so that they are individuated ultimately via spatiality. Such a strategy is rejected by Brentano’s most faithful pupil Anton Marty (2011: 33). Marty’s claim is that the relation of our mental acts to our body does not fall within our inner consciousness. However, the individuating factor of your mental acts must be given to us in inner consciousness. Although Marty does not say why this is the case, he probably has in mind Brentano’s thesis that if the object of inner consciousness were deprived of its individuator, then inner consciousness

¹³ Brentano was also opposed to the claim that the soul, despite being non-extended, could nonetheless occupy a spatial point, a thesis that he attributed to Descartes, Leibniz, and Herbart. He stressed that all physiological attempts to prove this have failed, e.g. the hypothesis of the “vital knot” by Pierre Flourens (Brentano 1976: 198 n. 1; see also 1933: 158–159, where Brentano holds that the soul is not itself a spatial point; note, however, that both these texts are edited by Kastil). I know of no text where Brentano rejects the thesis that mental acts occupy spatial points, but I think that given his dualism, he would have rejected this hypothesis as well: spatiality is a feature of physical phenomena, not of mental phenomena.

¹⁴ Interestingly, as a former priest, Brentano could have adopted the Christian idea that the body resuscitates and, thus, is able to accompany the soul in eternal life (I thank David Wörner for this remark), but he apparently did not follow this path. Note that Brentano’s discussion of the mind-body problem is imperfectly known to us, since it is found in material still partly unpublished; Brentano wanted to treat of this issue in the third part of his *Psychologie*, which he never wrote (on all this, see Rollinger 2011). Some material on the topic has been edited in Brentano 1954 and 1929; the relevant texts are mainly due to Kastil, although he bases himself on notes from Brentano (see Mayer-Hillebrand’s introduction in Brentano 1954 and Kastil’s in Brentano 1929; see also Krantz Gabriel 2017: 146–147). Much editorial work is required on this topic in order to get a view of Brentano’s exact position. For a presentation of Brentano’s discussion of the mind-body problem as found in the currently edited texts, see Krantz Gabriel 2017.

would be not intuitive but conceptual. Unfortunately, this argument is problematic from the point of view of Brentanian philosophy itself: one could claim, following Brentano's own rules about inner perception, that the relation to the body is given to us in inner perception but we do not notice it. In addition, Marty (2011: 33) affirms that the relation between mind and body, while not a relation of identity (due to dualism), is causal, and that this could not serve to individuate mental acts. In a causal relation, the cause does not individuate the effect, since the same individual effect can be produced by different causes. The burden of individuation, Marty says, is on the side of the effect, not that of the cause.¹⁵ Finally, note that Brentanians would not be content with an individuation of our mental acts that depends on a relation to the body; for they claim that our mental life survives our body, but they would surely also hold that it is still individual.

As a result, it seems that Brentano is unable to individuate his mental acts in his trope ontology: object individuation is forbidden to him because he denies the existence of an underlying subject of mental acts, he rejects primitive individuation because he accepts the principle of indiscernibles, and he rejects spatio-temporal individuation because mental acts are not spatial in themselves, nor can they be individuated via a relation to the body. What then is the next step?

2.2. *The subject as individuator of mental acts*

Given the problems mentioned above, if Brentano wants to individuate mental acts, he will be forced to abandon one important claim of his philosophy: either his "psychology without a soul", or the principle of indiscernibles, or dualism and the immortality of our mental life. Around 1900, Brentano explicitly provides a solution to the problem of the individuation of mental acts, and the solution does indeed renounce one of these major elements. He now claims that mental acts are individuated through the soul. He says this in his text *Von der Substanz* from around 1900:¹⁶

¹⁵ One might wonder how it is possible for the relation to be causal if mental acts are *abstracta*, and as such causally inert and impassive. The answer, it seems to me, is that Brentanians, while allowing for causality (either active or passive) at the mental level, think that the agents or patients are not the abstract mental acts themselves, but *consciousness*, understood as a concrete unity of all mental acts, which are thus its "parts". In that sense, what would be causing or caused would not be an (abstract) act of thinking, but a (concrete) thinker, understood as a unity of the act of thinking and various other acts, beginning with an act of inner perception. On the unity of consciousness, and the fact that mental acts are parts of it, see Brentano 1924: 221–251 and 1982: 19–27, as well as Textor 2017.

¹⁶ For the dating, see the editorial remark by Wilhelm Baumgartner in Brentano 1993: 25 n. 1.

Specifically similar acts are individually distinct when they are mine or someone else's. The individualizer is the subject. (Brentano 1993: 33)

Brentano also defends this view in an undated manuscript titled *Von der Seele* (Brentano LS1b; in addition, see the text from 1901 published in 1982: 146–161, which mentions similar issues).¹⁷ So one reason (among others) for the introduction of the soul in Brentano's later philosophy of mind might well have been the problem of individuation.¹⁸

Surprisingly, while the earlier Brentano said that he was unable to perceive his soul by reflexive consciousness, he seems later to hold that we do have some cognitive access to the soul. Indeed, for a short period one finds him saying that we do perceive something zero-dimensional as a subject that underlies our mental acts; this zero-dimensionality is a positive feature of the soul, which corresponds to extension for physical entities (Brentano 1933: 158).¹⁹ This is a rather mysterious claim, with which, I must confess, I struggle from a phenomenological point of view: I am unable to report that I perceive a zero-dimensional entity which bears my mental acts. Perhaps Brentano could be interpreted in a less mysterious way here, as holding that we all have a special feeling of an "I" which is present in all our thoughts, something unitary and non-extended which accounts for each of us being the specific person he or she is (see Brentano 1982: 146, which goes in that direction).²⁰ Indeed, he will finally hold, in this spirit, that we do not perceive zero-dimensionality as a positive feature, but grasp only the non-extension of the soul (see 1933: 270, and Kastil's comments, *ad* 153 n. 1). However, even in this less unfamiliar sense, Brentano's claim that a subject is present in each of my mental acts does not strike me as obvious from a phenomenological point of view.

What are mental acts for Brentano in this period? Around 1900, he still accepts in his ontology what he calls *abstracta*, e.g. "blackness", etc. (2013: 472; on Brentano's ontology, see again Chrudzimski 2004), and his view is that mental acts are *abstracta*. Are they tropes? They must be, since, as noted above, Brentano rejects both Platonic and Aristotelian realism about universals. So, his *abstracta* must be abstract *particulars*. The problem is that their

¹⁷ For more references and chronological information on Brentano's adoption of the notion of the soul, see Fugali 2002. On this topic, see also Fréchette (2015) and Krantz Gabriel (2017).

¹⁸ For a (short summary and) "test" of this understanding of Brentano's theory of the individuation of mental acts, including the claim that Brentano posited the soul in order to account for individuation, see Taieb 2021 and Textor 2021.

¹⁹ Recall, however, that Brentano 1933 was edited by Kastil, and so should be employed cautiously if no comparison is made with the original manuscripts.

²⁰ I thank Benjamin Schnieder for this suggestion.

individuation is warranted by their underlying subject, namely, the soul, and so they seem rather to be “disguised universals”. Indeed, as noted above, trope theorists hold that tropes should be simple entities; that is, they should not have distinct ontological “grounds” for their qualitative and individuating feature, for otherwise the qualitative part would resemble a universal (see Maurin 2002 and Moreland 2011). A fortiori, they should not be qualitative features individuated by a connection with another entity, such as a subject. However, this seems indeed to be Brentano’s position, since he holds that mental acts are individuated by the soul.²¹ In any case, what is certain is that for Brentano around 1900 the individuator of mental acts is the soul.

As for the soul itself, Brentano, borrowing an Aristotelian distinction, holds that it is a “substance”, and that mental acts are its “accidents”. While substances exist independently of any accident, accidents require for their existence a substance in which they inhere; in other words, there is a “one-sided separability” between substances and accidents (see Chisholm 1978). The soul itself, independently of its accidents, has several metaphysical layers: it has features common to physical and psychical substances, namely, the ability to bear accidents; it has features proper to all animals, probably the ability to have sensations; it has “specifically human *propria*”, namely, the rational powers; and it has an individuating feature (Brentano 1993: 34–35 and 38). What is this individuating feature? Since Brentano accepts the principle of indiscernibles, there must be a qualitative difference which is responsible for the particularity of different souls. In other words, souls are not bare particulars for Brentano, nor does he think that they have a “haecceity”, that is, a non-qualitative individuating property (Brentano explicitly criticizes haecceities in 1933: 112, quoted in Kriegel 2015: 156 n. 7 and 166 n. 28). However, although Brentano does think that there must be some such qualitative individuating difference for the soul of each one of us, he holds that it is unknowable to us. Why?

His explanation has to do with our ability to notice differences. He thinks that if we were to have one and the same element present and unmodified in all our psychical activities, we would never notice its particularity. In order to notice something’s particularity, or even its specificity, that is, what distinguishes it from other species of the same genus, we need a comparison: we must grasp either something from the same class but with another difference, that is, a “positive opposite”, or something from the same class but deprived of any

²¹ For the claim that Brentano turns out to be committed to “disguised universals” when his ontology is compared to contemporary discussion about tropes, see again Taieb 2017.

difference, that is, a “privative opposite”. Without such a process, the difference would remain “implicit” to us; that is, our knowledge of both the general features of the class and the specifying or particularizing aspects of the element in question would be only “confused”.

Brentano makes this clear with the help of two examples borrowed from his philosophy of mind. According to him, judgments divide into judgments of acknowledgment and judgments of denial, that is, affirmative and negative judgments. Affirmative judgments are those in which we accept the existence of an object, while negative judgments are those in which we reject its existence.²² Now, Brentano claims that if we were able to make only affirmative judgments, we would not notice what is specific to them. We would have a confused cognition of the genus of judgment and of the specific difference of acknowledgment. It is only because we are acquainted with negative judgments as well that we are able to notice the specific difference of acknowledgment, together with that of denial. This is a case of noticing made with the help of a positive opposite. How does the case of privative opposites work? Let us take Brentano’s other example. In addition to their division into affirmative and negative, judgments, both of acceptance and of denial, can either be evident – that is, they present themselves to us as indubitable – or non-evident – that is, they are deprived of this phenomenal feature. If we were to experience only evident judgments, we would be unable to notice what is specific to evidence. It is only when we can make a non-evident judgment that the feature of evidence appears to us distinctly (Brentano 1982: 49–55 and 61–62, as well as Textor 2017; for a similar explanation, see also Marty 2011: 35).

How does this apply to the soul? The soul is given to us in our mental acts as an underlying subject. Our soul is always there together with all our mental acts, unmodified. Since it is never absent from a mental act, there is no mental act which could play the role of a privative opposite, that is, one that would exhibit, say, “mental act-ness” *minus* the soul. What about positive opposites? In order for us to have a positive opposite, we should be able to grasp a mental act that has as its subject a soul other than our own. But we cannot grasp another soul, that is, we are never acquainted with another soul: each of us can perceive only his or her own soul. Another option which would build a case for a positive opposite is if our soul were to change with respect to its individual qualitative difference during our lifetime. Then we would notice both particularities: that of the previous soul and that of its successor. But this does not happen either. Thus, while our mental acts are individuated by our souls,

²² For more on Brentano’s theory of judgment, which is a non-propositional theory, and explains predicative judgments in terms of existential ones (either affirmative or negative), see Brandl and Textor 2018.

and while our souls themselves are different particulars because of qualitative differences, each of us is still unable to know what makes of his or her soul the particular soul it is. But this epistemological restriction does not change anything at the metaphysical level: mental acts are individuated by the soul.

Note one point: when Brentano introduces the soul in his theory, he says that we perceive it without noticing its individuating difference; as well (as I showed in part 2.1 above), he holds that the reason why our mental life is individual is because reflexive consciousness is a perception, not a conceptual presentation, the object of which is general. But wouldn't the absence of a noticing of the individuating difference make the object of our inner perception a general object? Clearly, in view of the discussion above, the answer is no: the individuating difference is given to us, although we grasp it only confusedly.

2.3. *The late theory: the subject as individuator of thinkers*

From 1904 until his death, Brentano adopted a parsimonious ontology called “reism”: he defended the idea that the only entities that exist are “things”, or (in Latin) *res*, that is, concrete particulars such as Socrates, wise-Socrates, foolish-Socrates, etc. (Brentano 1933; see again Chrudzimski 2004 and the analysis in Taieb 2017). By contrast, all the entities gathered together under the term *irrealia* in his early theory are abandoned: not only *abstracta*, but also states of affairs, *possibilia*, etc. Things, which are concrete particulars, are causally efficacious and causally responsive entities. Thus, for the late Brentano, all that exists can act or be acted upon. Things are divided into substances, e.g. Socrates, and accidents, e.g. wise-Socrates. Accidental concrete particulars all have a substantial concrete particular as a part; for example, wise-Socrates (which is an accident) has Socrates (which is a substance) as a part. Socrates is a substantial concrete particular, because he does not need the existence of any other concrete particular in order to exist, while wise-Socrates is an accidental concrete particular, because it needs the existence of Socrates in order to exist (Kriegel 2015). Substantial concrete particulars are individuated in themselves. Accidental concrete particulars have a substance as a part, which is responsible for their individuation (see, among others, 1933: 54–55, quoted in Schnieder 2006b: 149). Things are further divided into corporeal and psychical things.

Brentano's theory aroused some skepticism among his readers. Some found Brentano's attempt to admit only concrete particulars without admitting any properties, either universal or particular, hard to understand. If there is no property distinguishing Socrates, wise-Socrates and foolish-Socrates, then what grounds the distinction between them? One

might be tempted to say that the distinction is perhaps not due to an additional property, but to some “portion” of wise-Socrates and foolish-Socrates, namely, the portion of them which remains if you subtract Socrates from them. However, such a move would probably be blocked by Brentano, who holds that wise-Socrates and foolish-Socrates, while they do have Socrates as a part, have no additional part (Brentano 1933). It is not just that this last claim makes it difficult to see what then distinguishes these entities; as emphasized by various interpreters (Chisholm 1978, Simons 1988, Schnieder 2006b, Kriegel 2015), it also violates a basic rule of supplementation in mereology, namely, that “if an individual has a proper part, it has another proper part disjoint from the first” (Simons 1988: 56). For this reason, Brentano’s readers asserted that one should not take him literally when he holds that substances are parts of accidents, but rather interpret him as treating substances as “constituents” of accidents, meaning that accidents cannot continue to exist if their substance disappears, but not vice versa; this, again, refers to the already-mentioned relation of one-sided detachability (Chisholm 1978). While this reinterpretation helps to save Brentano from a mereological awkwardness, it still does not make clear what distinguishes Socrates, wise-Socrates, and foolish-Socrates.

One solution has been to say that the difference should be treated as primitive, that is, that the ontological distinctions that philosophers usually explain by importing properties, be they accidental or not, should be treated as unexplainable: “things are just different, nothing *makes* them different” (Kriegel 2015: 166). The general picture would then be that Socrates, wise-Socrates, and foolish-Socrates are different entities which nonetheless coincide, like a statue and the clay of which it is made, which are different but still coincide (Kriegel 2015, following Baker 1997).

Another option, which solves both the problem of distinguishability and the mereological problem, has been to say that there are in fact some “portions” that distinguish wise-Socrates and foolish-Socrates from Socrates, and that they are even parts but inseparable ones. On this interpretation, Socrates, wise-Socrates, and foolish-Socrates only partially overlap. However, this interpretation seems to bring Brentano back to his earlier view, since inseparable parts of this kind very much resemble tropes (Simons 1988).

Whether or not Brentano’s late ontological framework should be accepted, what is clear is that it no longer allows for abstract properties. These are treated as “fictions”: in reality, there is no wisdom, but only wise-things, e.g. wise-Socrates. Thus, for the late Brentano mental acts such as thinking, etc., do not exist, strictly speaking. What exists rather are psychical things, that is, thinking beings: perceivers, imaginers, judges, etc. A thinker is

an accidental concrete particular with a substance as a part. Thus, when Socrates is thinking, there is not some sort of property that is attributed to Socrates. Rather, there is a thinker with Socrates as a part, or “thinking-Socrates” (Kriegel 2015); and in “thinking-Socrates” the individuator is Socrates. Thus, in this later framework, mental acts are reduced to accidental concrete particulars with a subject as a part, and this subject is responsible for the individuation of the whole. This is an idiosyncratic view of “mental acts”, and of the ontology of the mind more broadly, and it could be submitted to many philosophical challenges. What is clear, however, and what interests me for present purposes, is that the individuator of our mental life in the late Brentano is still the subject.

Conclusion

How are mental acts individuated? For Brentano, mental acts are at first, from 1874 until around 1900, tropes that are independent of any soul but hard to individuate, and then, from around 1900 until 1904, they are *abstracta* that are individuated by the soul. Later on, from 1904 until his death in 1917, he rejects the very existence of mental acts and reduces them to *concreta*, that is, to thinkers, which still owe their individuation to the subject that they have as a part (or “constituent”, as Chisholm 1978 prefers to say). What then is the best option for the individuation of our mental life? Brentano’s favoured option is clearly the soul. However, one might be skeptical about his choice. Indeed, the soul is not obviously given in our experience. Or at least I must confess that I fail to see what Brentano wants me to notice when he speaks of the perception of a “soul” or of a substance bearing my mental acts. What I suspect rather is that, given his overall metaphysical framework, Brentano had difficulties in explaining how mental acts are individuated, and made an inference to the best explanation, postulating a soul as their individuator. Thus, from an “empirical standpoint” – that is, from the first-person, reflexive point of view, the point of view that Brentano himself wants to take – introducing the soul in one’s psychology – that is, accepting such an inferential object – seem to be open to criticism; for this is a strategy not of “empiricists” but rather of rationalist psychologists. (Here I follow Textor 2017, who criticizes Brentano’s account of the soul for the same reasons; a similar discussion of the introduction of the soul in philosophy, but which focuses on Leibniz’s rationalist psychology, is found in Perler 2016.) The soul thus seems to be a bad option, at least from the point of view of Brentano’s own methodology.

How, then, are mental acts to be individuated, if not by the soul? Supposedly, one has to go back to a trope account of mental acts. As we have seen, however, this presented a problem for Brentano, since in his framework it was not easy to explain the individuation of

mental acts understood as tropes. The object-individuation theory – which, incidentally, is a bad solution according to contemporary philosophers – was closed to him, given his early rejection of the soul, and obviously should remain closed in an account which tries to individuate mental acts without the soul. Nor was individuation via spatio-temporality available to him, since mental acts are non-extended, and therefore cannot be individuated via spatiality; in other words, Brentano's mind-body dualism blocked spatio-temporal individuation. According to Marty, the only way to connect the mind to the body is by a causal relation, which does not allow for the individuation of mental acts, given that effects do not owe their individuation to their causes. Moreover, Brentano defends the immortality of the soul, or of the mental life; that is, he maintains that it persists after the destruction of the body to which it is connected. Now, once the soul, or the mental life, is separated from the body, surely it should still be individual. This entails that its individuation cannot be due to a relation to the body. Finally, Brentano's acceptance of the principle of indiscernibles, which forces him to look for a qualitative distinction when two entities are numerically distinct, blocked the path towards primitive individuation, according to which tropes are numerically distinct by themselves without any further explanation required.

It seems that there are here only two ways out. If one rejects the principle of indiscernibles, one can then say that mental acts are tropes which are primitively individuated. But it is not clear to me that Brentano would accept doing so. Alternatively, one could either go for a materialist account of the mind by adopting an eliminativist position, which would easily allow for spatio-temporal individuation of mental acts, or, less radically, one could try to connect the mind closely to the body, not by causality, but by another relation. In contemporary philosophy, there is a whole array of relations at the disposal of those who want to make the mind ontologically dependent on the body – among others, supervenience, realization, and, as argued more recently, grounding. (For a list of the various options available in the philosophy of mind, including grounding, see Ney 2016.) Would one of these allow for individuation of mental acts via a connection to the body? In fact, this question would not interest Brentano so much; for he would be unsympathetic to any attempt to individuate mental acts by appeal to the body, due to his defence of the immortality of the soul. It thus seems that if Brentano wants to individuate his mental acts, he should abandon either Leibniz or the afterlife.

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