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Kant, Brentano and Stumpf on Psychology and Anti-Psychologism

Guillaume Fréchette

My psychological standpoint is empirical; experience alone is my teacher. Yet I share with other thinkers the conviction that this is entirely compatible with a certain ideal point of view.

Brentano¹

In all the criticisms made by Franz Brentano against nineteenth-century philosophy, be it in the *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* or in his later writings, Kant undoubtedly occupies the place of honor. In Brentano's view, Kant not only postulated without any justification synthetic *a priori* judgments, but he also instigated the phase of decadence that characterized German philosophy in the first half of the nineteenth century. Beyond these polemic affirmations that often attract attention, it is important to put things in perspective and investigate how such criticisms are construed and what their origins are. In the present paper, I focus more specifically on the reception of Kantian psychology by Brentano and his students. Certainly, Brentano's rejection of Kantian psychology goes along with his total rejection of the synthetic *a priori* judgments. What I want to suggest here is that in the specific case of psychology, the hostile reception of Kantian philosophy in the school of Brentano is mainly due to a combination of two factors. The first is Kant's rejection of psychology in the theory of knowledge. The second, which is correlative to the first factor, is the Brentanian rejection of Kant's thesis on the impossibility of psychology becoming a science. In what follows, I investigate these two factors in detail, using as a case study the position advo-

1 Brentano, Franz: *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*. London, 1973, xxv. German original in Brentano, Franz: *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkte*. Leipzig 1874, V.

cated by Carl Stumpf in ‘Psychology and Theory of Knowledge’². This work fully deserves to be discussed: Stumpf (1848–1936) was not only one of the most brilliant and influent students of Brentano, but his essay also played an important role in the school of Brentano, offering one of the rare printed confrontations with the Kantian and Neokantian positions on psychology.

The Brentanian Stance on Kant

Although Brentano rejects humean skepticism, he doesn’t accept Kant’s position on skepticism:

In Germany, it was Kant who undertook to save knowledge from Hume’s skepticism, and his method was in essence very similar to that of Reid. Kant claimed that science demands as its foundation a number of principles which he called synthetic *a priori* judgments. On close inspection of what he means by this, however, it turns out that the term *a priori* amounts for him to propositions that stand for us as true from the beginning without their being evident. The sum of *a priori* judgments have the same character as Reid’s judgments of common sense.³

In Brentano’s opinion, Kant and Reid adopt the same basic idea that there are common-sense judgments – judgments which, though they are not evident, appear to be certain and likely to found a science. Kant would go too far in his fight against skepticism by asserting that the objects of knowledge bear on such blind judgments. Brentano therefore rejects synthetic *a priori* judgments not because they are *a priori*, but because one can’t ‘see’ their correctness, i. e. because they are blind. Accepting blind judgments (*blinde Vorurteile*) as the basis of our knowledge and therefore establishing the existence of God, the immortality of the soul and liberty as postulates of the practical pure reason is a consequence that Brentano cannot accept.⁴

Another point of difference between Brentano and Kant concerns the synthetic *a priori* that characterizes mathematical axioms. These are syn-

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- 2 Stumpf, Carl: “Psychologie und Erkenntnistheorie”. In: *Abhandlungen der Königlich Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 19, 1891, 465–516. All further references to this essay are abbreviated here as *PE*.
 - 3 Brentano, Franz: *The Four Phases of Philosophy*. Amsterdam 1998, 99. German original in Brentano, Franz: *Die Vier Phasen der Philosophie*. Hamburg 1926, 1968², 20.
 - 4 *Ibid.*, 22.

thetic because they are not analytic: the truth of the proposition expressed by '7 + 5 = 12' doesn't follow from the content of concepts. Of course, this reasoning is unacceptable for an empirical psychologist like Brentano. In his view, the descriptive analysis of a mathematical proposition, or of any kind of proposition, always gives us the content of the concepts involved. This content is mental in nature, whereas mathematical propositions are always analytic in nature.

A further problem coming from the Kantian characterization of mathematical axioms as synthetic *a priori* is that all these axioms have a negative form. Therefore, an analytic judgment may increase our knowledge according to the school of Brentano. Mathematical axioms, which are considered analytic, are evident in a way that makes them as reliable as judgments of inner perception. For example, the judgment to which the utterance 'this is yellow' gives voice is a judgment of inner perception according to Brentano. That such a judgment is said to be evident means that from the standpoint of one's experience of seeing a yellow spot, it is impossible for one to judge otherwise. This is why Brentano often says that the true form of an evident judgment is basically negative.⁵ It is then easy to understand why axioms and analytic judgments are judgments that have a negative form or that are reducible to such judgments since the true form of A-judgments like 'All As are Bs' is 'there is no A which is non-B'. This holds for both kinds of evident judgments: those based on axioms or those based on inner perception. An evident judgment basically means that things are such and such *and* that they cannot be otherwise.

Let's turn now to the first of the two factors mentioned in the introduction. Against Kant's view that psychology will never become an explanatory science, especially because mathematics are not applicable to mental phenomena, Brentano partly takes sides with Herbart, according to whom one may use mathematics to do psychology in an exact manner, provided that there is something you can count, such as quantities or intensities. But unlike Herbart, Brentano does not believe that one can find determinations of actual measurements in this way. Neither does he believe that the Weber-Fechner law is applicable because it rests on a confusion between the attention to sensation (*Ebenmerklichkeit*) and the

5 In the case of our example, its true form could be rendered by 'there is nobody who judges that this is not yellow'. Although it is not fully unproblematic, I used here the transformation rule proposed by Brentano for judgments about fictive entities in Brentano, Franz: *Die Lehre vom Urteil*, Bern 1966, 56.

comparison of sensations (*Gleichmerklichkeit*).⁶ In addition, the use of mathematics in psychology is problematic for Brentano because sensations do not depend on the strength of the stimulus itself, but rather on the mental conditions of the experience. In this sense, one can say that Brentano defuses Kant's objection to an experimental psychological science on two levels: on the one hand, mathematics cannot be ruled out of the field of psychology, but on the other hand, scientific practice of psychology does not depend on its mathematization. According to Brentano, the descriptive analysis of mental phenomena is a tool of the same scientific quality as mathematics.

Stumpf versus Kant

After this brief review of the Brentanian account of Kantian philosophy, and more specifically of his account of Kantian psychology, I turn now to Carl Stumpf, who was the first among Brentano's students to take into account the Neokantian position on psychology, providing a uniquely detailed reaction to the typical Kantian and Neokantian positions of that time.

Stumpf sets the criticist position and the psychologistic position in contrast. From the psychologistic position, knowledge is a psychological process, and a psychological investigation should therefore be prior to every theory of knowledge. For the criticist position, psychology leads to empirical laws and not to the knowledge of general and necessary laws. According to the psychologistic position, one can know that the square of the hypotenuse equals the sum of the squares of the two other sides without knowing the difference between analytic and synthetic judgments. More generally, one can investigate mental states of affairs without any theory or critique of knowledge. According to Stumpf, these are unproblematic issues, but it is precisely the approach which is questioned by Kantian philosophers. Following Kant, knowledge without critique is knowledge without laws, without norms and without truth at all.

6 In a nutshell, the Weber-Fechner law states that every increase in sensations is identical with an increase of the physical stimulation. Therefore, the intensity of sensations increases in the same measures as physical stimulation. Its first formulation is to be found in Weber, Ernst Heinrich: "Tastsinn und Gemeingefühl". In: *Handwörterbuch der Physiologie, mit Rücksicht auf physiologische Pathologie*. Ed. R. Wagner. Volume 3, part 2. Braunschweig 1846, 481–588.

To this, Stumpf replies in a Brentanian manner: “Knowledge can be not only true, it may be perfectly evident to the one who knows, right up to its last foundations, even if the one who knows has no theory at all of this evidence.”⁷

The real issue which is at stake concerns the role of the theory of knowledge in psychology. Stumpf argues against criticism that epistemological reflections are needed in psychology for its completion although they are not needed for its foundation. This forms an open opposition to the criticist position, according to which the roots of the science of experience are found in the *a priori* forms of intuition and thought, in the transcendental synthesis and in the transcendental schematism. Without the category of unity, it is impossible to even speak of objects. For Kant, substantiality, causality and necessity are forms of synthesis, categories that allow forming objects, nature and its regularity. Nature does not exist in advance. Rather, it follows from understanding. Such phenomena are not structured as such and do not have immanent laws.

Despite this opposition against the Kantian foundational role of the theory of knowledge in all sciences and against the marginalization of psychological analyses in the Kantian epistemological project, it is noteworthy that Brentanians agree with Kantians on what is called a phenomenon: their respective positions differ on the properties of the phenomena. According to the critical philosophy, phenomena have no laws that are strictly immanent, while the principle which allows Brentanians to investigate the phenomena disregarding the concerns of the theory of knowledge is based precisely on the thesis that phenomena have immanent laws which can be discovered by observation and psychological analysis.

It is therefore understandable that a large part of Stumpf’s critique of Kant’s philosophy attacks the theory that the mind creates the objects and their laws. The main target of this attack is the Kantian distinction between the matter and the form of our presentations (*Vorstellungen*). According to Stumpf, it is precisely the neglect of psychological research that led Kant to misconceptions in his theory of knowledge:

Thus [...] it is precisely the neglect of psychological research that led to the conception which we recognized as one-sided and unenforceable in its one-sidedness in terms of the theory of knowledge. [The cause of this neglect is to be found] first and foremost [in] the continuous distinction between the matter and form of presentation. (*PE*, 481)

7 *PE*, 469.

In other words, the criticist thesis leads, according to Stumpf, to a unilateral perspective on the question of the theory of knowledge, a perspective that remains hard to defend because of its starting thesis, including the distinction between matter and form in our presentations. In fact, Kant thinks that he can arrive at this distinction not only by following the strict opposition of categories and phenomena, but also within the realm of sensory perception itself. This is the well-known thesis in the light of which space and time are to sensory qualities (colours, sounds, etc.) simple forms of intuition.

As an answer, one can insist that Kant's distinction is not the result of psychological considerations, but rather of metaphysical considerations. One can stress that the decisive factor behind these considerations is the possibility of synthetic *a priori* judgments and more specifically the possibility of mathematical knowledge – but nevertheless, metaphysics must pass the test of psychology. As Stumpf stresses, something cannot be true epistemologically and false psychologically at the same time (*PE*, 482).

This is precisely the problem that results from the distinction between matter and form: it is psychologically untenable:

[The distinction] has even been largely harmful to the advancement of research, and it also extended to other areas in which it was applied. For the so-called formal logic, ethics and aesthetics are linked in their unproductive one-sidedness to such an epistemological distinction. (*PE*, 482).

In Stumpf's view, everything we think and talk about is *eo ipso* a content of our consciousness, and critical philosophy doesn't aim at giving a theory of the unconscious; therefore, Kantian philosophy should explain the possibility conceiving space as a conscious presentation. It should be able to explain how space, time and causality can be *contents* of consciousness. As a result, the distinction between the matter and form of acts of presentation should also have its counterpart in the distinction between the matter and form of contents of consciousness. Yet this transition from a strictly epistemological standpoint to its adaptation in a psychological point of view does not seem to be solved in the framework of critical philosophy. Consequently, the form appears as an ordering principle for phenomena, as Kant states explicitly at the beginning of the transcendental aesthetic.⁸

8 See Kant, *KrV*, A 20: "In der Erscheinung nenne ich das, was der Empfindung correspondirt, die Materie derselben, dasjenige aber, welches macht, daß das Mannigfaltige der Erscheinung in gewissen Verhältnissen geordnet werden

In view of this reflection, one can say that the matter of our presentations is always given to us *a posteriori*. Correspondingly, the form must be in the mind *a priori* and therefore can be considered independently of the sensation. This means that we can exclude from the presentation of a body everything that is related to sensation and that we can think only its form. But Stumpf obviously doesn't agree with this conclusion:

The fact that colour qualities are arranged in space and that these same qualities may appear to us in a different spatial order does not justify the separation of space from the sensory content. The qualities appear to us also in different intensities, and the different qualities can appear simultaneously in different intensities [...]. (*PE*, 484–485)

In other words, presentational parts which belong to the form are always given in sensations in a direct manner. According to Stumpf, the Kantian separation between the form and matter of presentations has this unfortunate consequence that it cannot answer the question on how to explain the specific localization of certain sensations. If space were really a form of intuition, the problem of the specific localization of a certain sensation would then be explained by the *a priori* nature of space. In the light of the Brentanian standpoint, this does not do justice to what is given in intuition.

In the dispute between nativists and empiricists in the nineteenth century, Hermann Lotze, teacher of both Stumpf and Windelband, had tried to overcome the difficulty in Kant's theory by arguing that spatial intuitions in general are *a priori*. He added that the determined and changing localizations of non-spatial and unordered qualities are conditioned by local signs (*Lokalzeichen*). By local signs, Lotze means sensory qualities of a special kind, which contain an informational element. For example, the muscular sensations of the eye, as Lotze contends, help us to localize colour sensations which are non-spatial in his view.⁹

In Stumpf's view, Lotze's Kantian compromise, which aims to combine the *a priori* conception of space with a psychological theory that

kann, nenne ich die Form der Erscheinung. Da das, worin sich die Empfindungen allein ordnen und in gewisse Form gestellt werden können, nicht selbst wiederum Empfindung sein kann, so ist uns zwar die Materie aller Erscheinung nur *a posteriori* gegeben, die Form derselben aber muß zu ihnen insgesamt im Gemüthe *a priori* bereit liegen und daher abgesondert von aller Empfindung können betrachtet werden."

9 On Lotze's *Lokalzeichen*, see Lotze, Rudolf Hermann: "De la formation de la notion d'espace. La théorie des signes locaux". In: *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 4, 1877, 345–365.

does justice to what is given in sensation, is not satisfactory. The relative simplicity of muscular sensations is not sufficient to present with precision the optical localization. Moreover, in order to give a full Kantian account of intuition that copes with psychological investigations, Lotze's theory of local signs should also be transposable to the intuition of time, which is in itself problematic:

The separation of the form from matter in the Kantian sense destroys any possibility to predicate the first of the second and to characterize certain impressions in particular cases as felt here and there, as multiplicities, as effects, etc. The separation is just as impracticable as Aristotle's ontological separation bearing the same name, and that of the Scholastics, with which it shares historical relations. [...] But if psychology [...] is able to demonstrate that these theories of signs – and so the distinction between the form and matter in our presentations – are a result of the 'critical method', then it is not necessary to add that the psychological research is essential to the theory of knowledge. (*PE*, 489–490).

According to Stumpf, special sciences, as is shown by the history of mathematics, emerge through the decomposition of complexes which one previously thought to be atomic. A classification of sciences that takes this fact into account would then find its last step in a genetic classification of the simplest concepts of relationship. But this Brentanian 'table of categories' fundamentally differs from Kant's table. At the heart of this table of categories, one should consider according to the Brentanians the many different relationships that occur between the parts and the whole.

Thus the separation of the matter and form of our presentations is not only harmful for the theory of knowledge, but it is also impracticable in psychology. And the neglect of psychology caused by the Kantian rejection thereof in a theory of knowledge does not allow a classification of science that does justice to the development of special sciences:

With the *a priori*, Kant had and wanted to say something about the psychological origin of the forms of intuition and thought; he was not simply affirming its meaning for the theory of knowledge. He wants to say [...] that the *a priori* concepts cannot be analyzed and they are not given by our senses as contents of sensation. But this negation of analyzability is itself a psychological affirmation; and this affirmation is just as evident as it is considered erroneous by most representatives of psychology and physiology, as far as space is concerned, as if space wouldn't be given through our senses. In all cases, we have here a new proof of the need for more accurate psychological claims in the theory of knowledge. It is simply not possible to avoid the grounds of psychology, even if the interest is not exclusively in the heights of critical knowledge. The neglect of psychology is not, as it has often been said, a secondary and an unimportant characteristic [of the Kantian

theory of knowledge], but is rather a fundamental damage [caused by] the Kantian philosophy. (*PE*, 495)

The theses of Stumpf and of the Brentanians must however be tempered when we take into account the true intentions of Kant beyond the reputation he has been attributed by Alois Riehl and Johann Eduard Erdmann in the nineteenth century. Precisely the Kant-interpretations of Riehl and Erdmann played an important role in the reception of Kant among Brentano's students.¹⁰ In particular, it is important to relativize the charge issued by Stumpf on the marginalization of psychology or at least to restrict it to the psychology that Kant was confronted with at the time.

Against the anti-psychologistic interpretation of Kant, one can ask if the view that psychology should not be confused with logic is really a thesis concerning the fact that there cannot be any psychological knowledge or concerning the fact that psychology cannot become a science. As Sturm puts it, we have to distinguish between the impossibility of empirical psychology of becoming a science, and the more radical thesis, not advocated by Kant, that there is no psychological knowledge as such.¹¹ Some of Stumpf's arguments are clearly based on the latter thesis. Besides, one must remember that the empirical psychology criticized by Kant is the psychology advocated by Wolff and Baumgarten, a psychology that investigates, in its empirical part, the 'thinking nature' by the exclusive means of the inner sense.¹²

Furthermore, it should be noted that this conception is based on a radical conception of introspection. It was precisely in the context of this introspective psychology advocated by Wolff that Kant pronounces the impossibility of empirical psychology becoming an experimental science.¹³ He does so for two reasons. First, the observation of our own

10 See Riehl, Alois: *Der philosophische Kriticismus und seine Bedeutung für die positive Wissenschaft*. In three volumes, Leipzig 1876, 1879, 1887; Erdmann, Johann Eduard: *Versuch einer wissenschaftlichen Darstellung der Geschichte der neuern Philosophie*. Leipzig 1842/1853 (volumes 2 and 3).

11 See Sturm, Thomas: "Kant on Empirical Psychology". In: *Kant and the Sciences*. Ed. E. Watkins. Oxford 2001, 165–181.

12 On Baumgarten's influence on the early Kant concerning his conception of psychology and metaphysics, see *Neue Anmerkungen zur Erläuterung der Theorie der Winde*, TW, AA 01: 503; *Nachricht von der Einrichtung seiner Vorlesungen in dem Winterhalbenjahre von 1765–1766*, NEV, AA 02: 308 f.; MSI, AA 02: 397; SE, AA 07: 141.

13 See MAN, AA 04: 471.

mental states through inner sense can not be subject to repeatable experiments. Second, if the objects and psychological states were considered accessible only through the inner sense, the differentiations we operate on them would be done only by thought.¹⁴ Therefore, the experiments realized in this introspective psychology are only thought experiments. On this point, Kant and the Brentanians would agree in their rejection of the introspective method in psychology.¹⁵ Their positions, nevertheless, remain irreconcilable as to the distinction between the matter and form of our presentations.¹⁶

14 See Sturm, Thomas: *op. cit.*, 178.

15 See Brentano, Franz: *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, 99 f. German original in Brentano, Franz: *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkte*, 168 f.

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