

“Vera philosophiae methodus nulla alia nisi scientiae naturalis est”

Brentano’s conception of philosophy as rigorous science

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Abstract: Brentano’s conception of scientific philosophy had a strong influence on his students and on the intellectual atmosphere of Vienna in the late nineteenth century. The aim of this article is to expose Brentano’s conception and to contrast his views with that of two traditions he is said to have considerably influenced: phenomenology and analytic philosophy. I will shed light on the question of how and to what extent Brentano’s conception of philosophy as a rigorous science has had an impact on these two traditions. The discussion will show that both took their liberties in the interpretation of the thesis, a move that allowed them to liberate themselves from Brentano’s inheritance and to fully develop their own philosophical positions.

Brentano’s position in the history of philosophy is somewhat peculiar. It is widely acknowledged that he has made important contributions to a broad range of topics and introduced ideas and conceptions that have come to shape the philosophical discussion in the twentieth century. Moreover, he had a strong influence on his students, some of who have become famous philosophers in their own right. It has often been suggested that he should be considered a forerunner of both the phenomenological movement (cf., e.g., Spiegelberg 1965) and the tradition of analytic philosophy (cf., e.g., Haller 1979). For these reasons, Brentano is often regarded a key figure in the history of late nineteenth and early twentieth century philosophy.

It is sometimes pointed out, however, that the high number of references to Brentano is misleading, for he is often only *mentioned* for his influence on other

philosophers or for having introduced key notions – most prominently the notion of intentionality – to the contemporary debate, but his actual contributions are hardly *discussed* and therefore risk to be overlooked in the contemporary debate (cf. Smith 1996, 61). As a result, it is argued, Brentano does not receive the attention he merits; some philosophers even speak of a “Brentano puzzle”, which consists in the question of why so few philosophers would mention Brentano as one of the principal philosophers of the nineteenth century, even though the width and depth of his intellectual legacy are widely acknowledged (cf. Poli 1998, ix).

These strong divergences in the assessment of Brentano’s role in the history of philosophy can, I think, at least in part be explained by the fact that the claims concerning Brentano’s strong influence on the two dominant traditions of the first half of the last century – phenomenology and analytic philosophy – are correct but at the same time greatly exaggerated and potentially misleading. They are correct as we can trace Brentano’s influence on members both of the phenomenological movement and the analytic tradition. They are potentially misleading because many of the philosophers influenced by Brentano did not continue his work or see themselves as working within a Brentanian tradition. Rather, they typically started from selectively chosen aspects of his philosophy to take off in very different directions.

In this paper I will focus on Brentano’s conception of philosophy as a rigorous science, which had a strong impact on his students and had considerable resonance both in the phenomenological movement and among analytic philosophers. I will discuss and situate Brentano’s thesis by contrasting it first with the conception of the Vienna Circle and with contemporary philosophical naturalism and then, in the last section of the paper, with Husserl’s conception of philosophy as a rigorous science. By contrasting Brentano’s view

with these other conceptions I hope to be able to illustrate what Brentano did and, in particular, what he did not intend to say with his maxim that philosophy should adopt the method of natural science.

1 Brentano and logical empiricism

When it comes to Brentano's influence on analytic philosophy, the three aspects that are often highlighted are his interest in the analysis and critique of language, his interest in logic, and his scientific conception of philosophy. In addition to these three points, Barry Smith suggests (correctly, as I think, although the claim needs to be specified) that Brentano has "shared with the British empiricists and with the Vienna positivists an anti-metaphysical orientation" (Smith 1997, 8).¹ We will see that it is not at all obvious, however, that the members of the Vienna circle were aware of this last parallel.

In the first section of the so-called *manifesto* of the Vienna Circle the authors give a short description of the historical background from which their movement has emerged. They point out that the philosophical atmosphere in Vienna was characterized by an anti-metaphysical attitude and a liberalism that had been informed "from the enlightenment, from empiricism, utilitarianism and the free trade movement of England" (Neurath, Hahn,

¹ Interestingly enough, Brentano's influence on analytic philosophy is often traced back not to his anti-metaphysical orientation, but rather to his "analytic metaphysics" (cf. Stadler 2001, xvi). Barry Smith's point does seem appropriate, though, as Brentano's metaphysics shares basic characteristics with analytic metaphysics. "For", as Roderick Chisholm has put it, "analytic metaphysics is opposed, not to metaphysics, but to undisciplined and irresponsible ways of thinking about philosophy" (Chisholm 1982, 114).

and Carnap 1973, 301). In particular, they mention the influence of Ernst Mach, Ludwig Boltzmann, Joseph Popper-Lynkeus, as well as that of Franz Brentano and – as members of Brentano’s school – that of Alois Höfler and Alexius Meinong. The impact of these persons, according to the authors, explains the vivid interest in epistemological and logical problems in Vienna. The scholars mentioned have paved the way for the Vienna circle in different ways, though: when the authors of the *manifesto* discuss the influence of Mach and Boltzmann, they mention their interest in the foundations of physics. Franz Brentano, on the other hand, is praised for his starting “from the scholastic logic and from Leibniz’s endeavours to reform logic” and for his “understanding of men like Bolzano (*Wissenschaftslehre*, 1837) and others who were working toward a rigorous new foundation of logic” (Neurath, Hahn, and Carnap 1973, 302). Brentano, thus, is mentioned mainly for his contributions to logic, and probably because he was known for advocating an empirical standpoint. It is interesting to note that in the discussion of the merits of the various “antecedents” the authors of the *manifesto* underline their anti-metaphysical attitude. In the case of Brentano, however, they limit themselves to mentioning that he was a Catholic priest. The fact that they explicitly mention Brentano’s clerical background and limit his influence to the field of logic can be read, I think, as an attempt to distance themselves from Brentano’s *Weltanschauung* and the metaphysical framework in which it was embedded.

It is noteworthy that even though the authors of the manifesto reduce Brentano’s influence on the Vienna circle to his interest in logic and critique of language and to his contributing to create an intellectual climate in Vienna that made the emergence of the Vienna Circle possible, they did not mention his conception of philosophy as a rigorous science. In the next section I will introduce and shortly characterize this conception so that I can confront it better with contemporary philosophical naturalism (section 3) and with the

conception of philosophy and the unity of science that was predominant in the Vienna Circle (section 4).

2 Brentano's fourth Habilitation-thesis

Brentano has expressed his views on the scientific character of philosophy very early in his life and in a very short and concise manner. In the fourth of his 25 *Habilitations*-theses from 1866 he states: “Vera philosophiae methodus nulla alia nisi scientiae naturalis est (*The true method of philosophy is none other than that of the natural sciences.*)” (Brentano 1929, 136).² It seems that this thesis has received quite some attention right from the beginning, for Brentano states 27 years later, in his 1893 lecture “Über die Zukunft der Philosophie [On the Future of Philosophy]”:

It [*the fourth Habilitation-thesis*] did not appear as something established (mainstream) but was rather received as most conspicuous and among the 25 theses that were displayed it was the one that was chosen the primary target of critique. (Brentano 1929, 9)³

² Brentano's *Habilitations*-theses (in Latin and German) are reprinted in Brentano (1929, 133–141). I have borrowed the English translations from Smith (1996).

³ My translation: “Sie erschien aber damals keineswegs wie etwas Hergebrachtes; vielmehr wurde sie als höchst auffällig empfunden und unter meinen fünfundzwanzig zur Disputation ausgeschlagenen Thesen zur vorzüglichen Zielscheibe der Angriffe gewählt.”

While this passage suggests that Brentano's examiners did not whole-heartedly agree with his fourth thesis, but rather challenged it, his scientific conception of philosophy has strongly impressed his early students in Würzburg. Carl Stumpf describes in his "Reminiscences of Franz Brentano" the impact it had:

We were especially happy that the method he claimed for philosophy was none other than that of the natural sciences, and that he based his hopes for a rebirth of philosophy on this method. It was a new, incomparably deeper and more serious way of understanding philosophy. (Stumpf 1976, 11)⁴

⁴ Stumpf talks not only about himself, but also about Anton Marty. In a letter to Brentano, which is quoted in (Brentano 1929, 30), he writes: "This thesis, he added, and everything connected to it, was it what tied Marty and me with enthusiasm to your flag". [My translation: "Diese These, fügte er bei, und was damit zusammenhing, war es auch, die Marty und mich mit Begeisterung an Ihre Fahne fesselte."] Werner Sauer suggests that Brentano's thesis does not establish a revolutionary program, but should rather be understood as a look back on the philosophical tradition (cf. Sauer 2000, 141). The reactions from his students, who had access to Brentano's explanations, shows, however, that at least they did not perceive Brentano's position as a look back on the history, but rather as the beginning of a new way of doing philosophy. (With this I do not mean to suggest, of course, that Brentano was not inspired by philosophers of the past who had advocated a rigorous method for philosophy.)

This passage clearly shows that Brentano conceived this thesis a central element of his contention that – after the various phases of decline that he diagnosed in the philosophy of his time (cf. Brentano 1998) – a renewal, the upcoming of a new period in philosophy, was desperately needed. Unfortunately, Brentano did not comment his twenty-five Habilitation-theses, nor do we have, as far as I am informed, a detailed report of the defence, so we have to rely on circumstantial evidence – such as the testimony of his students or lecture notes from the period – when it comes to understand what exactly he had in mind when he formulated them. The importance of such a reconstruction lies in the fact that Brentano’s thesis can easily be misread if we look back to it at the beginning of the 21st century.

3 Was Brentano a forerunner of philosophical naturalism?

A contemporary reader who does not have an interest in the history of philosophy, nor a particular background on Franz Brentano, and who comes across Brentano’s fourth Habilitation-thesis, will likely take it for an endorsement of philosophical naturalism. It is notoriously difficult to give a clear-cut definition of naturalism, most of the ones that have been proposed distinguish between a metaphysical and an epistemological thesis, the latter of which is strikingly similar to Brentano’s thesis. According to one standard characterization, naturalists typically hold that “reality is exhausted by nature, containing nothing ‘supernatural’, and that the scientific method should be used to investigate all areas of reality including the ‘human spirit’” (Papineau 2009). The question of whether Brentano would accept the metaphysical thesis depends on how exactly it is to be understood. If it is taken to mean that only material or physical entities exist, Brentano would definitely deny it. If, on the other hand, it means that there are no abstract entities, but only “natural” ones, he could definitely agree. We should keep in mind that the first part of the characterization

of naturalism is notoriously open to very different conceptions, as recent publications on “liberal naturalism” show.⁵ The second part of the thesis seems more substantial, as it denies the idea that there is a method for philosophical research that is different from that of scientific research and suggests (minimally) that there is a continuity between the philosophical method and the method of the natural sciences.

Nonetheless, it does not seem correct to call Brentano a naturalist. For sure, a liberal naturalist could insist that mental phenomena, presentations, judgments, and phenomena of love and hate “are as much part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, and playing” (Wittgenstein 2009, § 25). Human beings, one could argue, are part of nature just like trees, lakes and mountains and it belongs to the nature of human beings to have mental phenomena: but it seems to me that this line of reasoning does not do justice to Brentano. The notion of nature did not have a particular relevance for him, nor did he think that there was uniformity among natural phenomena. On the contrary, the very fact that he distinguishes between mental and physical phenomena suggests that for Brentano there was a realm of objects that were substantially different from the objects studied by the natural sciences. In fact, Brentano warned explicitly against this line of reasoning which he considered fallacious:

It is in this context a very common mistake to confuse research in analogy to the research of nature [Naturforschung] with research that consists in the study of the same class of phenomena as the research of nature; just like, for example, some are

⁵ For a contrast between scientific and liberal naturalism, cf. M. De Caro and D. McArthur (2008).

so foolish to base themselves psychologically only on experiences of seeing, hearing, feeling, but non on experiences of the so-called inner perception, like judging, preferring. (Brentano 1929, 79)⁶

The attempt to label Brentano a naturalist philosopher would, thus, be nothing but a desperate attempt to extend the notion of naturalism to an extreme that would turn the label into an empty slogan.

4 Brentano on the unity of the sciences and formal methods

It might be more tempting to read Brentano's thesis in the light of early twentieth century conceptions of the unity of the sciences. The very fact that Richard von Mises has chosen Brentano's thesis as motto for the part on "Natural sciences and Humanities [Natur- und Geisteswissenschaften]" in his *Kleines Lehrbuch des Positivismus* (1939) might invite for a reading along these lines and, in fact, Rudolf Haller and – although with some restrictions – Barry Smith have explicitly drawn a connection between these two ideas. Haller points out that Brentano accepts "a series of essential principles of positive philosophy: first and foremost that of the *unity of scientific method* and the homogeneity of doctrines, in short,

⁶ My translation: „Ein hierhergehöriger, besonders häufiger Fehler ist es, wenn einer die Forschung nach Analogie der Naturforschung mit einer Forschung verwechselt, welche auf dem Studium derselben Klasse von Phänomenen beruhe, wie die Erforschung der Natur; wie denn z. B. manche so töricht sind, nur auf Erscheinungen des Sehens, Hörens, Tastens, nicht aber auf Erscheinungen der sog. Inneren Wahrnehmung, wie Urteilen, Vorziehen, psychologisch sich stützen zu wollen.“

principles that have gained central importance for logical empiricism” (Haller 1993, 27).⁷

Haller, thus, suggests that Brentano had anticipated the unity of science thesis that became so central to the Vienna Circle. A similar thought might be hinted at in the following lines from Barry Smith:

Brentano held that the method of the natural sciences is common to all the sciences, so that he is, in this respect an advocate of the unity of science and a critic of Dilthey’s view according to which the so-called *Geisteswissenschaften* or human or moral sciences would somehow call for a special method of ‘understanding’ or *Verstehen*, as opposed to the ‘explanation’ of the natural sciences. (Smith 1996, 31)

Smith is definitely right to point out that Brentano’s thesis contains a refutation of Dilthey’s distinction between the natural sciences and the humanities. It would be misleading at best, however, to suggest that Brentano’s thesis has anticipated the unity of science thesis of the Vienna Circle. Brentano never states that there was *one* scientific method, but rather insisted in the diversity of methods and procedures that are to be found in – and are appropriate for – different scientific disciplines. In his lecture *On the Future of Philosophy*, in which he replies to the arguments presented by Adolf Exner in his inaugural lecture as rector of the University of Vienna, he states:

⁷ My translation: “Er anerkennt jedoch eine Reihe wesentlicher Prinzipien der positiven Philosophie: allen voran die *Einheit* der wissenschaftlichen *Methode* und die Homogenität der Doktrinen, kurz, Prinzipien, die auch für den logischen Empirismus eine zentrale Bedeutung gewinnen.”

Natural science, thus, requires in no way, as the argument presupposes, that we should proceed everywhere in the same manner and in the way we do in the simplest cases of mechanics. On the contrary, it teaches and instructs us to change our procedure [*Verfahren*] in accordance with the particular nature of the objects and to sometimes raise and in other times lower our standards, in order to gain, in the former case, a fuller success, and, by giving up on the impossible, to reach the scientifically possible in the latter case. (Brentano 1929, 35)⁸

Every scientific discipline will require a different method and a different level of precision that is appropriate to the objects it studies. What these methodologies have in common – and what qualifies them as scientific – is that they are all based on experience and proceed by deduction and induction; but there is no plea for unity in Brentano that goes beyond that. In particular, it seems important to emphasize that Brentano does not suggest that a method can count as scientific only if it makes use of a formal language or if the respective discipline can be mathematized. He explicitly states that formal approaches (in this sense) can be helpful in some disciplines, but not in others: “Mathematical analysis, which is the

⁸ My translation: “Die Naturwissenschaft verlangt also keineswegs, wie das Argument voraussetzt, daß wir überall gleichmäßig und so, wie in den einfachsten Fällen der Mechanik vorgehen sollen. Im Gegenteil, sie unterweist uns und übt uns darauf ein, der besonderen Natur der Gegenstände entsprechend unser Verfahren zu ändern und unsere Ansprüche bald zu steigern, bald herabzustimmen, um dort den volleren Erfolg zu erzielen, hier, auf das Unmögliche verzichtend, das wissenschaftlich Mögliche glücklich zu erreichen.”

main means of scientific progress in some areas of natural science, practically does not play any role at all in others.” (Brentano 1929, 35)⁹ This shows that Brentano did not call for a mathematization of philosophy when he suggested that it should apply the method of the natural sciences. This is worth pointing out as sometimes it is suggested that Brentano’s call for rigorous, scientific methods in philosophy was manifest in his interest for Aristotelian and scholastic logics, in the “clarity of his reasoning and the thoroughness of its execution” (Weingartner 1968, viii)¹⁰ or, as it suggested in the manifesto of the Vienna Circle, in his interest in the renewal of logic. Brentano did have an interest in logic, but, as Edgar Morscher has pointed out, “the later Austrian philosophers who took part in the development of modern logic have little connection with Brentano’s contribution” (Morscher 1978, 5). Given that Brentano’s interest in logic seems to be the main motive for the authors of the manifesto to refer to him, this enforces the impression that this reference is not first and foremost an expression of a serious intellectual indebtedness; Brentano’s name rather serves for the reconstruction of the emergence of a philosophical and cultural climate in Vienna that made the emergence of logical positivism possible. Given the propagandistic style of the manifesto, one might even go so far as to suggest that the reference to Brentano is little more than a case of name-dropping, an attempt of appropriating an esteemed philosopher.

⁹ My translation: “Die mathematische Analyse, die auf manchen Gebieten der Naturwissenschaft das hauptsächliche Mittel des Fortschrittes ist, spielt darum bekanntlich auf anderen so gut gar wie keine Rolle”.

¹⁰ My translation: “Klarheit der Gedankengänge und Gründlichkeit der Durchführung.”

This impression might be reinforced by the fact that this reference to Brentano is not representative for the whole Vienna Circle. In a review of Oskar Kraus's volume *Franz Brentano: Zur Kenntnis seines Lebens und seiner Lehre*, Moritz Schlick, for example, discusses Brentano's role in a more distanced and critical manner. After praising Brentano for his striving for truth and his fourth *Habilitations*-thesis he criticizes him:

... a scientific[ally oriented] thinker will have to reject in great parts the content [*das Inhaltliche*] of his [*i.e., Brentano's*] philosophy, it is hardly in line with this thesis."

(Schlick 1919, p. 99)¹¹

Schlick, who praised the fourth *Habilitation*-thesis, thus, suggests that Brentano did not live up to his own methodological maxim – as Schlick understood it –, which shows that Schlick's own understanding of scientific philosophy – and consequently that of the Vienna Circle – was substantially different from Brentano's.

5 Brentano's thesis: *pars destruens* and *pars construens*

So far I have mainly argued how Brentano's thesis should not be understood. To better grasp what he aimed at we should, I think, distinguish a *pars destruens* and a *pars construens* of the thesis. The former is the aspect that was probably most intriguing for many of Brentano's contemporaries: he clearly denies that there is a particular method that could

¹¹ My translation: "... das Inhaltliche seiner Philosophie wird der naturwissenschaftlich Denkende freilich zum großen Teil ablehnen müssen, es steht mit der Forderung jener These zu wenig im Einklang."

characterize or distinguish philosophical research that was superior to, prior to, or foundational for that of the natural sciences. Brentano, thus, distances himself clearly from the conceptions of Kant and post-Kantian philosophers as becomes clear when we think of his first *Habilitations*-thesis: "Philosophy must deny that the sciences can be divided into the speculative and the exact; because if this is not correctly denied, then philosophy itself would have no right to exist."¹²

In later texts Brentano draws the connection to Kant and post-Kantian philosophy explicitly, for example when he recalls a view that he had already voiced at the time of his *Habilitations*-thesis:

But also with regard to him [Kant] I have taught already a quarter of a century ago that he has gone astray and that his arbitrary constructions and his unnatural [*widernatürliches*] A priori have become the introduction to the extravagancies of his successors. (Brentano 1929, 12)¹³

¹² "Philosophia neget oportet, scientias in speculativas et exactas divide posse; quod si non recte negaretur, esse eam ipsam jus non esset. / Die Philosophie muß protestieren gegen die Einteilung der Wissenschaften in spekulative und exakte, und die Berechtigung dieses Protestes ist das Recht ihrer Existenz selbst."

¹³ "Aber auch über ihn lehrte ich schon vor über einem Vierteljahrhundert, daß er einen Abweg eingeschlagen habe, und daß seine willkürlichen Konstruktionen und sein widernatürliches A priori die Einleitung zu den Extravaganzen der Nachfolger gebildet hätten."

Moreover, he suggests that his fourth *Habilitations*-thesis was intended to contrast the methodological approaches of Schelling and Hegel.¹⁴

The positive aspect of the thesis is that it underlines the *continuity* of method between philosophy and the natural sciences. We have already seen above that this does not imply a unity of the sciences or a unified method that could be applied in all scientific disciplines – as a narrow reading of Brentano’s thesis would suggest. In particular, Brentano does not hold that there is *one* scientific procedure of conducting experiments, gathering data, or organizing hypotheses that is to be applied in all disciplines, including philosophy. Moreover, Brentano does not suggest that the philosophical method is to be replaced by or reduced to the method of physics, nor does he argue that philosophy should make use of the language of mathematics to present its results. A cornerstone of the scientific method is definitely that it starts from experience – but the experience in question might vary drastically from one discipline to another – and rigor in the formulation of the hypotheses and in the conduction of inductive generalizations and deductive inferences.

¹⁴ It is directed against a view that “... was predominant at least in the first half of the century, when Schelling proceeded with his genial-constructive, Hegel with his dialectical method, but both in agreement that in philosophy nothing was to be achieved with the natural-scientific method.” (Brentano 1929, 8) [My translation: “... war wenigstens in der ersten Hälfte des Jahrhunderts vorherrschend, als Schelling nach seiner genial-konstruktiven, Hegel nach seiner dialektischen Methode vorging, jeder vom andern verschieden, aber doch darin, daß in der Philosophie mit naturwissenschaftlicher Methode nichts zu richten sei, durchaus mit ihm einig.”

Brentano, thus, acknowledges the differences between scientific disciplines but does admit, at the same time, that the demarcation lines between them might not be clear-cut¹⁵ and that they can benefit from one another: “there is no pair of sciences between which there are no reciprocal services” (Brentano 1995: 8).

With these two criteria we see that there is a parallel between Brentano’s conception of the unity of science and a conception that was important within the Vienna Circle: Otto Neurath’s encyclopaedic conception (cf. Neurath 1983). Unlike the most dominant views of the unity of science in the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century (cf., for example, Oppenheim and Putnam 1958), both Brentano and Neurath put more emphasis on the collaboration between scientific disciplines than on a hierarchical order between them and both did not postulate a reduction of “higher” theories to those that are more fundamental. The striking difference between the two is that Brentano would not accept Neurath’s conception of a “thing-language”, a regimented language that is purged of all metaphysical expressions allows only for terms that refer to spatio-temporally extended entities.

In order to get a clearer idea of Brentano’s conception of the method of the natural sciences and the collaboration of the disciplines, we should recall Brentano’s distinction between descriptive and genetic psychology: descriptive psychology – or psychognosy – studies consciousness (mental phenomena) from a first person point of view, while genetic psychology (or physiological psychology) does so from a third person point of view,

¹⁵ “The borders that we draw between one scientific discipline and another, can at no place be observed rigorously” (Brentano 1895, 35) [My translation “die Grenzen, die wir zwischen Wissenschaft und Wissenschaft ziehen, können nirgends streng eingehalten werden”]

conducting controlled experiments and studying the bodily, physiological basis of consciousness. Brentano's emphasis is definitely on the former, which in his view deserves to be called "pure psychology".

"[I]ts aim is nothing other than to provide us with a general conception of the entire realm of human consciousness. It does this by listing fully the basic components out of which everything internally perceived by humans is composed, and by enumerating the ways in which these components are connected." (Brentano 1995a, 4)

The experiential basis of descriptive psychology is thus of a specific – privileged – kind: it rests on inner perception which, as Brentano notoriously states in his *Psychology*, "is really the only perception in the strict sense of the word" (Brentano 1995b, 91). The method of descriptive psychology is not without difficulties, one can easily be misled, but it has the great advantage that all the phenomena it studies "are without exception intuitively contained in our consciousness" (Brentano 1995a, 4). Descriptive psychology is, thus, a strict science and proceeds by providing an accurate and complete description of the phenomena experienced (experiencing – noticing – fixing), followed by a process of inductive generalization, the statement of general laws and the making deductive use of what has been gained (cf. Brentano 1995a, 31f).

Genetic psychology, on the other hand, proceeds by conducting controlled experiments in psychological laboratories or by doing physiological studies – just as it is usually done in the natural sciences. And yet Brentano insists that – unlike descriptive psychology – genetic psychology is not a strict science. "The former is an exact science,

whereas the latter will presumably have to renounce forever any claim to exactness” (Brentano 1995a, 3). The decisive point is that in descriptive psychology it is possible – just like in mathematics or mechanics – to “formulate doctrines sharply and precisely” while genetic psychology – just like meteorology – has to content itself with “undetermined and vague formulae” (Brentano 1995a, 5).

The laws of Becoming which it [genetic psychology] postulates are not strictly valid. They are subject to a more or less frequent occurrence of exceptions. Like meteorology, genetic psychology needs to diminish the precision of all its doctrines, by using terms like ‘often’ and ‘mostly’, in order for them to be true. (Brentano 1995a, 6)

Thus, Brentano’s suggestion that genetic psychology is not a strict science does not depend on the fact that it relies on a form of perception that is less reliable than descriptive psychology, which relies on inner perception. After all, also the laws of mechanics concern phenomena and rely on data that are not accessible by inner perception, and still Brentano calls mechanics a strict science. The problem is rather that the laws of genetic psychology are not universal and do allow for exceptions. It is important to note, however, that this does not imply that genetic psychology is not scientific or that the method it applies does not live up to the standards of the scientific method.

At the same time I vehemently rejected the misguided view that, in saying this, my intention was to discredit the scientific legitimacy of genetic psychology or to describe it as a hotbed of arbitrary speculation. (Brentano 1995a, 7)

According to Brentano, thus, both descriptive and genetic psychology are scientific disciplines, both are important in their own right, and ideally they collaborate so as to achieve the best results. We see that even though Brentano privileges descriptive over genetic psychology, he suggests that there is a continuity and a collaboration between the two scientific disciplines.

6 Brentano and Husserl's notion of philosophy as a rigorous science

After having exposed Brentano's conception of a scientifically oriented philosophy and contrasted it with the conception of the Vienna Circle I would like to take a quick look at how Brentano's notion relates to that of Edmund Husserl. It is well known that Brentano played a central role in Husserl's philosophical training. After having earned a doctoral degree in mathematics, Husserl took courses with Brentano at the University of Vienna from 1884–86, which have impressed him so much that he decided to abandon a career in mathematics and devote himself completely to philosophy. This decision was mainly influenced by Brentano's way of doing philosophy, in particular by his conviction that philosophy should be conducted in a rigorous, scientific method. In his "Reminiscences of Franz Brentano" Husserl writes:

It was from his lectures that I first acquired the conviction that gave me the courage to choose philosophy as my life's work, that is the conviction that philosophy, too, is a field of serious endeavour, and that it too can – and, in fact, must – be dealt with in a rigorously scientific manner. (Husserl 1976, 48)

These encounters with Brentano have essentially shaped Husserl's philosophical perspective, as is well known. Not only did he adopt key notions of Brentano's philosophy in central places of his own philosophical position, he also took quite often Brentano's views as starting points for his own philosophical reflections, which, however, tend to go far beyond Brentano.

An example that illustrates this point well, I think, is that in the first edition of his *Logical Investigations* from 1900/1901 Husserl used the Brentanian term "descriptive psychology" to describe his own method; in the second edition from 1913 he replaces it with the term "phenomenology". This shows not only Husserl's indebtedness to Brentano in central questions, it also shows that in order to fully develop his own philosophical standpoint he had to overcome Brentano's influence and make substantial steps beyond his early mentor's position. In a letter to Brentano he brings it to the point when he says: "I began as a disciple of your philosophy ... but once I had matured to independence, I could no longer remain with it" (Husserl 1994, 22).¹⁶ The main aspects in which he moved beyond Brentano are his critique of psychologism¹⁷ and his so-called "transcendental turn", in which he accommodates Kantian elements into his own philosophical position. This becomes

¹⁶ My translation: "Ich begann als Jünger Ihrer Philosophie ... und konnte, als ich zur Selbständigkeit herangereift war, nicht bei ihr stehen bleiben." The German word *Jünger* has a strong religious connotation, more so than the English word *disciple*.

¹⁷ For a more detailed discussion on the impact of Husserl's critique of psychologism on his relation to Brentano and other members of the Brentano-school, cf. (Huemer 2004 and 2009).

particularly clear when we contrast Husserl's conception of a rigorous science, as it is outlined in his article "Philosophy of a rigorous science" (Husserl 1911), with Brentano's.

At a first, superficial look Husserl's views can seem quite similar to Brentano's: both suggest that philosophy should be a rigorous science, both suggest that our first-person knowledge about our current mental phenomena should play a special role in this project, both use the word "pure" to describe their own method, and both suggest that experiential (or genetic) psychology cannot live up to the level of strictness we have in philosophy. The main difference between the two conceptions is that Brentano argues for continuity between philosophy and the natural sciences, whereas Husserl spots a gap and a hierarchical order between them. And even though both, Brentano and Husserl, suggest that philosophy is rigorous because of the way it gets access to the phenomena it studies, we find a crucial difference also in this aspect: in Brentano's approach, inner perception plays a central role, but is just one way to gain experience among others (though it does so, unlike the others, in a particularly evident way). Husserl, on the other hand, suggests that we gain access to the phenomena by a special procedure, the intuition of essences, that requires a shift of attention. With this new form of intuition, Husserl distances himself not only from Brentano, but also from what in 1911 he takes to be misinterpretations of the position he had presented in the first edition of *Logical Investigations* (cf. Husserl 1911, 318). Unlike Brentano – and very much in line with Kant – Husserl, thus, suggests that philosophy can be a rigorous science only if it succeeds in developing and applying a very own method that is distinct from and prior to that of the natural sciences. In short, Husserl learns to overcome

Brentano's aversion against Kant¹⁸ and to accept what his teacher has called Kant's "unnatural a priori" and the "extravagancies of his successors" (Brentano 1929, 12). While it seems quite plausible to assume that Husserl's initial enthusiasm for the idea that philosophy ought to be a strict science was aroused by Brentano, I find it quite telling for their later relationship that in his elaboration of this idea he comes to completely undermine Brentano's main motivation for formulating the thesis in the first place – and finds allies in a philosophical tradition that Brentano most despised.

Given that two of the main developments of Husserl's philosophy in the last decade of the 19th and the first decade of the 20th century – his critique of psychologism and his transcendental turn – are at odds with convictions that run very deeply in Brentano's philosophy, I think that the latter, more than a forerunner of the phenomenological movement, should be considered a stimulator of a process the development of which was

¹⁸ In his "Reminiscences of Franz Brentano" Husserl mentions that in his early years he was under Brentano's influence in his attitude towards German idealism. Of Brentano he says that "[h]e, who was so devoted to the austere ideal of rigorous philosophical science (which was exemplified in his mind by the natural sciences) could only see in the systems of German idealism a kind of degeneration." Husserl continues that it took him some years to change his mind and appreciate that they opened "completely new and extremely radical dimensions of philosophical problems". Moreover, their contribution for establishing a rigorous method in philosophy is essential, since, as Husserl continues, "it is only through their clarification and through the elaboration of the method of philosophy called for by the very nature of these problems, that the ultimate and highest aim of philosophy will be revealed." (Husserl 1976, 50f).

no longer under his control and which has led to results that he found deeply disappointing. For this reason I find Gilbert Ryle's characterization quite fitting: Ryle calls Brentano in a late review the "disgusted grandfather of phenomenology" (cf. Ryle 1976).¹⁹

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¹⁹ I owe the reference to this short text, in which Ryle reviews Rolf George's translation of Brentano's *On the Several Senses of Being in Aristoteles* and Linda McAlister's volume *The Philosophy of Brentano*, to Guillaume Fréchette (cf. 2013).

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