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What is Wrong with the Immanence Theory of Intentionality?

Johannes L. Brandl

University of Salzburg

1. Introduction

According to the immanence theory of intentionality, perceptions, beliefs, desires, and perhaps all other mental phenomena can be analyzed as relations between a subject that perceives, believes and desires something and a special type of non-real entities that are variously called ‘immanent objects’, ‘intentional objects’ or ‘inexistent objects’. A theory of this kind has been advanced by Franz Brentano, who rediscovered the concept of intentionality for the philosophy of mind in the nineteenth century and thus became a founding figure of the phenomenological movement. Apart from this historical fact, however, the immanence theory of intentionality apparently has lost much of its interest. Most philosophers today seem to agree that this theory rests on a number of quite obvious confusions, and that a careful analysis of the concept of intentionality can – and should avoid the ontological and epistemological costs of this theory. It is therefore to the credit of Brentano and the members of his school that they soon dropped the immanence theory in favour of more adequate conceptions of the intentionality of mental phenomena.¹

Philosophical ideas tend to be long-lived, however. Some of the ideas underlying the immanence theory continue to attract philosophers both inside and outside the phenomenological tradition. Thus in recent years theories of phenomenal consciousness have been proposed that commit themselves to the existence of ‘qualia’ as constitutive features of subjective experiences.² These theories come more or less close to analyzing experiences as relations between subjects and entities that exist only in the mind of the

¹ For a clear exposition of this standard view see for instance (Moran 2000. pp.55ff.).

² The recent interest in phenomenal consciousness began with Ned Block’s and Jerry Fodor’s paper “What psychological states are not” (1972) and with Thomas Nagel’s seminal paper “What is it like to be a bat?” (1974). Since then the term ‘qualia’ has been used in a rather loose sense for the qualitative features of mental phenomena. See footnote 17 below

subject who experiences them. One might think, therefore, that some kernel of truth still remains in the immanence theory: it may not provide a plausible account of cognitive and conative mental states, like beliefs and desires, but it is still a viable candidate for a theory of subjective experience, or so it might seem.

In this paper I want to reconsider the case of the immanence theory, both from a historical and a systematic perspective. In section 2 I present some of the historical evidence that Brentano's original theory of intentionality was indeed an immanence theory which he gave up only at the end of his career. This 'orthodox' interpretation of Brentano has been challenged, however, for a number of reasons. I pursue these exegetical issues in section 3, where I will distinguish between a 'naive' and a 'sophisticated' version of the immanence theory. In section 4 I reconsider the two main objections that have discredited the theory, and I argue that neither of them does justice to it. Finally, in section 5, I take up the suggestion that the immanence theory might still be applicable to subjective experiences, and I show what is wrong with this suggestion.

2. Brentano's two theories of intentionality: the orthodox interpretation

In the literature on Brentano's philosophy there is considerable disagreement about how to interpret his views on the intentionality of mental phenomena. There can be no doubt about the fundamental importance that Brentano placed on the notion of intentionality by taking it to be the most important characteristic distinguishing mental and non-mental phenomena, and by building his entire philosophy on this insight. There is also no question that Brentano eventually tried to explain the concept of intentionality by appealing to the notion of a 'quasi-relation', even if the details of this explanation are not fully clear. The big unresolved problem, however, is what Brentano's conception of intentionality was before he introduced the notion of a 'quasi-relation'. This concerns his philosophy up to 1904, when he began to work out his 'reistic' ontology by systematically eliminating all sorts of non-real entities like possible and impossible objects, past and future events, etc., denying such entities also the status of entities existing 'in our minds'.³

³ Brentano's "turn away from non-realia" is documented in letters and manuscripts, some of which have been published posthumously in *Franz Brentano. Die Abkehr vom Nichtrealen* (1966). Brentano himself announced this change of mind in his "Supplementary Remarks Intended to Explain and Defend, as well

According to one interpretation – which has been called the ‘orthodox’ interpretation⁴ – Brentano advocated a radically different view of intentionality in his early writings, especially in the first edition of his *Psychology* (1874). At this time, it is claimed, he postulated a special realm of ‘mental entities’ that are not part of reality, but which exist merely ‘in the mind’ of the subject whose thoughts are directed at them. Following a Scholastic tradition, he called these entities ‘intentionally inexistent’ or ‘immanent’ objects. Hence there was no need for the early Brentano to deny that intentionality is a perfect relation, and to appeal to the notion of a ‘quasi-relation’ in order to explain the difference between mental and physical phenomena. Robert Richardson describes this standard view as follows: For the early Brentano, “mental phenomena *are* genuinely relational: the difference, or at least a difference, between mental and physical phenomena lies in the objects or in the mode of existence proper to those objects” (Richardson 1995, p.252).

Numerous passages in Brentano’s writings provide ample evidence that this was indeed his original view. First of all, there is the famous passage in the first edition of the *Psychology* in which, he states, after referring to the Scholastic notion of “intentional inexistence”: “Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself” (Brentano 1995, p. 88). And there are many passages in his lecture notes that express this view even more clearly. For instance, in his lectures on *Descriptive Psychology* Brentano says that in every act of consciousness we find “a certain kind of relation [...] that relates a subject with an object” (Brentano 1982, p.21). And in his logic lectures he argues :

It is good to emphasize just one thing again, namely that this relation [i.e. the intentional relation] has the peculiarity that one of its terms is real, the other not. Since one would be mistaken if one takes it to be the outer (and perhaps (often) real) object. The latter may be completely missing, the immanent one never.⁵

as to Correct and Expand upon the Theory” in the second edition of his *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, published in 1911.

⁴ See (Richardson 1982), p.250. Richardson himself rejects this orthodox interpretation as whose main proponents he mentions Chisholm and Szrednicki.

⁵ Brentano’s lecture notes have not yet been published. The quote is from a transcript of Brentano’s logic lectures delivered in Vienna in 1884/1885. The partly corrupt German passage in the transcript reads as follows: “Nur eines wird gut sein nochmals hervorzuheben, nämlich dass diese Relation [...] eigene hat, dass ihr ein[...] Terminus real, der andere nicht. Denn der würde irren, der als ihn das äussere (und

These must have been the claims that Brentano had in mind when he said in his Preface to the second edition of the *Psychology*: “One of the most important innovations is that I am no longer of the opinion that a mental relation can have something as its object that is not real” (Brentano 1995, p.xxvi).⁶ Despite this clear declaration, however, one might wonder how thorough going this change really was. If one reads the first sentence of his “Supplementary Remarks” the innovation seems to be very minor:

What is characteristic of every mental activity is, as I believe to have shown, the relation to something as an object. In this respect, every mental activity seems to be something relational.” (Brentano 1995, 271)⁷

Far from retracking anything that he had formerly said about the intentionality of mental phenomena, Brentano emphasizes here that he has *shown* – and hence still believes – that this characteristic consists in a relation to an object. As before, he refers to Aristotle, who had already pointed out what is distinctive about it, namely that whereas “in other relations both terms – the fundament and the terminus – are real, [...] here only the first term – the fundament – is real” (Brentano 1995, 271).

How does the orthodox interpretation cope with passages like this? One must read here ‘between the lines’ to get to the real message. There is a small, but important detail that an advocate of this interpretation can point to. Brentano does not simply claim to have shown that every mental phenomenon involves a relation to an object, he says that it involves a relation “to something *as an object*”. This cautious formulation indicates that Brentano really does take something back here. What he really tells us is this: formerly his aim was to show that every mental phenomenon is in fact a relation, namely a relation between something real and something non-real, but now he realizes that what he has actually shown was something much weaker, namely that every mental

vielleicht (oft) reale) Object nähme. Ein solches kann ganz fehlen, das immanente nie.” (Brentano Manuscript EL 72/2, p.88, Nr. B03489). I am grateful to the Forschungsstelle und Dokumentationszentrum für Österreichische Philosophie in Graz for providing me with this transcript.

⁶ I have changed the official English translation slightly. The German original reads: “Eine der wichtigsten Neuerungen ist, daß ich nicht mehr der Ansicht bin, daß eine psychische Beziehung jemals anderes als Reales zum Objekt haben könne” (Brentano 1973, Vol II, p.2).

⁷ The official English translation has “reference” instead of “relation”. The German term used by Brentano is “Beziehung”.

phenomenon *seems* to be something relational. Formerly he did not doubt that the intentional relation can be correctly classified as a kind of relation, but now he finds this problematic. Precisely this doubt leads him to introduce in the next step the notion of a ‘quasi-relation’:

So the only thing which is required by a mental relation is the person thinking. The terminus of the relation does not need to exist in reality at all. For this reason, one could doubt whether we really are dealing with something relational here, and not, rather, with something somewhat similar to somewhat relational in a certain respect, which might, therefore, be called ‘quasi-relational’. (Brentano 1995, p.272)

Thus the orthodox interpretation seems to be vindicated. As Chisholm once said, there are two clearly distinct theses of intentionality to be found in Brentano: an ontological and a psychological one (Chisholm 1967, p.201). Traces of both claims can be found already in the first edition of the *Psychology*. Still, as the orthodox interpretation assumes, Brentano originally advanced only the first, and later switched to the second thesis. Hence there is a contrast between an ‘early’ and a ‘late’ theory of intentionality in Brentano that can be summarized as follows:

The “old” theory: Every mental phenomenon can be analyzed as a relation between a subject and an object that exists merely in the mind of the subject.

The “new” theory: Every mental phenomenon can be analyzed as a quasi-relational feature that enables subjects to direct their thoughts at objects which may or may not exist in the mind-independent reality.

This orthodox interpretation of Brentano has not gone unchallenged, however. If the critics of this interpretation are right, there is something fundamentally wrong with separating the two theories in this way.

3. *Challenges to the orthodox interpretation*

The view that intentionality is an intra-mental relation between subjects and immanent objects has seemed to many philosophers so contra-intuitive that they hesitate to attribute this view to a philosopher of the rank of Brentano. Linda McAlister, Richard Aquila, and others therefore began to question the textual evidence on which this attribution is based.⁸ According to them the orthodox interpretation does not sufficiently take into account the traditional meaning of terms like ‘intentional inexistence’ and ‘objective being’, a usage with which Brentano was quite familiar.⁹ On the basis of this traditional background they try to show that there is no need to assume that Brentano ever accepted immanent objects as relata of the intentional relation.

This ‘reformed interpretation’, as it has been called,¹⁰ suggests that there is a strong continuity in Brentano’s writings. The allegedly ‘new’ theory, it is claimed, was not new to Brentano at all, but in fact was his theory of intentionality from the very beginning. Early on Brentano merely used an old-fashioned terminology that made it difficult to see what his view was. Once he settled on the notion of a ‘quasi-relation’, he was able to drop this misleading terminology and express his theory – the only theory that he ever had – in a much more straightforward way.

The arguments for and against this ‘reformed’ interpretation are complex, and their force can be evaluated only by a careful exegesis of the historical sources of Brentano’s texts.¹¹ I cannot enter this discussion here, but merely want to point out one aspect that illustrates how complex the issue is. It is important to know that in his early writings Brentano often did not use the term ‘immanent object’ at all, but instead preferred the notion of ‘content’ to express his intentionality thesis. For instance, in his logic lectures he claims :

⁸ See (McAlister 1974), (Aquila 1977), (Richardson 1982), (Kent 1984). To date the most detailed exegesis has been provided by Antonelli (2001). His reading of Brentano, which differs in various degrees from all previous interpretations, is in agreement with unpublished work by Werner Sauer.

⁹ In the meantime, the historical roots of this terminology receive much more attention. See e.g. (Sorabji 1991), (Caston 1998) (Perler (2002).

¹⁰ See (Richardson 1982), p.250.

¹¹ A partial defence of the orthodox interpretation has lately been given by Arek Chrudzimski who distinguishes between an early, a middle and a late period in Brentano’s views on intentionality and takes the middle period to be his “Meinongian” period during which Brentano developed a rich ontology of non-real entities including immanent objects. See Chrudzimski (2001).

All psychic phenomena have in common a relation to a content. That is what distinguishes them from everything else.¹²

There is certainly no need to understand this use of ‘content’ as carrying an ontological commitment to entities that are literally ‘contained’ in the mind of the subject who entertains a thought. What we are really referring to, when we speak about the content of a belief, the content of a desire, etc., are just the mental phenomena that ‘carry’ this content. So, why not understand Brentano in this way too?

There are two difficulties with this proposal. First of all, in the passage above Brentano clearly speaks of a *relation*; and how can there be a relation without there being at least two entities that are related to each other? Secondly, Brentano seems to have selected his terminology very carefully. In one of the manuscripts, he actually crossed out the term “Inhalt” and replaced it by ‘immanentes Object’.¹³ Is this not a clear sign that Brentano wanted this term to refer to a particular kind of entity, i.e. that he used it, not in the old, but in the modern sense?

Unfortunately, the situation is more complicated here. An advocate of the ‘reformed’ interpretation can respond to the above points as follows: When Brentano speaks of a ‘relation’, he also uses this notion in an old sense that differs from our present usage. Relations in the old sense are not the ontological correlates of *n*-place predicates, there being no relations in this sense at all. Relations in the old sense are epiphenomenal entities that can be reduced to complex properties, i.e. to the correlates of one-place predicates. Hence, all that must exist in order for a mental phenomenon to be related to a content is the mental phenomenon and the complex property ‘being-directed-at-a-content’. We are used to think of such properties as grounded in a two-place relation between a subject and what might be called a content-object, but for Brentano it is just the other way round: the relation is grounded in the complex property and thus there is no need for him to think of the content as a peculiar sort of object. But

¹² The German original is: “Alle psychischen Phänomene haben gemeinsam eine Beziehung auf einen Inhalt. Das ist, was sie von jedem andern unterscheidet”. (Brentano manuscript EL 80/2a, p.29, Nr. B28972). The undated manuscript is probably Brentano’s last logic lecture, parts of which have been used by the editor in compiling the text of *Die Lehre vom Richtigen Urteil* (1956)..

¹³ See for instance manuscript EL 72/2, original pagination p.57. These passages support the interpretation of Chrudzimski according to which Brentano committed himself to the existence of immanent objects not from the beginning, but only during a middle period beginning after the first edition of his *Psychology* and ending in 1904. See footnote 11 above.

why, then, did Brentano speak of immanent objects at all? Why did he replace the simple term ‘content’ with this cumbersome notion? This may have to do with his non-propositional theory of judgement. Propositions at this time were usually referred to as a ‘judgement content’, and, because Brentano had no room for such entities in his theory, he had a very good reason to avoid the notion of ‘content’ altogether.¹⁴

We now see that both the ‘orthodox’ and the ‘reformed’ interpretation can claim a certain plausibility. We should therefore look for some way to reconcile these two interpretations. This is possible, and the best way to do this, I think, is by correcting a mistake that is common to both interpretations. The mistaken assumption is that Brentano began with a *simple* theory of intentionality that consisted either in the ontological claim that mental phenomena are related to immanent objects or in the psychological claim that they are directed at (perhaps non-existent) objects in the real world. In my view Brentano’s early theory – or at least one of his early theories, if, indeed, there were several – was a complex theory that included both of these claims. It involved a commitment to immanent objects, as the orthodox interpretation says, but from the very beginning it also contained the idea of intentionality as a ‘quasi-relation’, as the reformed interpretation suggests. It is therefore no wonder, as Chisholm noted, that there are traces of both ideas already in the first edition of the *Psychology*. We should take these signs at face value and combine what I called the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ theory into a single theory.

There is, however, one obstacle for attributing such a complex theory to Brentano. This combined theory is consistent only if one distinguishes clearly between the content of mental phenomena and the (perhaps non-existent) objects at which these phenomena are directed. Today the distinction between the content and the object (or target) of a mental representation seems so obvious that a theory of intentionality without this distinction seems almost inconceivable. This does not prove, however, that it was obvious to Brentano too, and that we can attribute to him a theory whose consistency presupposes this distinction.

That Brentano may not have been aware of this distinction, it is sometimes said, can be seen from the fact that he used the terms ‘content’ and ‘object’ interchangeably. The credit therefore is given to Brentano’s pupils, in particular to Höfler and to

¹⁴ For a summary of Brentano’s theory of judgment see my entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of*

Twardowski, to have ‘discovered’ the fundamental importance of the content/object distinction. I think this is a mistake. Since the distinction can be expressed in more than one way, there is no need to reserve the terms ‘content’ and ‘object’ for marking the distinction. And there is clear evidence that Brentano was fully aware of the importance of this distinction. I have already quoted a passage from his manuscripts where he insists that one must not confuse the ‘immanent’ and the ‘outer’ object of a mental phenomenon. This passage continues with the following remark: “If one says that the presented is in the one who presents something, the known is in the knower, the lover carries the loved one in his heart, we can also say: the picture is in him.”¹⁵ This is exactly the same explanation of that distinction that Twardowski later used in his influential book on the content and object of presentations.¹⁶

What conclusions can we draw from this exegetical debate? The lesson to be learned, I think, is that we must distinguish between two versions of the immanence theory: a naive one and a sophisticated one. The naive version is the ‘old’ theory that has wrongly been attributed to Brentano. The only version that we can legitimately ascribe to him is the sophisticated version of the theory that incorporates the so-called ‘new’ theory as well.

In his late writings Brentano simplified this complex theory by dropping its ontological part. Thus we have now three different theories of intentionality to consider: two versions of the immanence theory and the ‘purified’ theory, as one might call it:

The naive immanence theory: Every mental phenomenon can be *completely* analyzed as a relation between a subject and an object that exists merely in the mind of the subject.

The sophisticated immanence theory: Every mental phenomenon requires a complex analysis that involves (i) a relation between a subject and an object that exists in the mind of the subject, and (ii) a quasi-relational feature that enables

Philosophy (Brandl 2000).

¹⁵ The German original is: “Und wenn es [i.e. das äußere Objekt] vorhanden, ist es vom immanenten zu unterscheiden. Wenn man sagt, das Vorgestellte sei im Vorgestellten, das Erkannte sei im Erkennenden, der Liebende trage das Geliebte in seinem Herze, so sagen wir auch wieder: das Bild sei in ihm, ...” (Brentano Manuscript EL 72/2, p.88, Nr. B03489)

¹⁶ See Twardowski 1982, p.4 (originally published in 1894).

subjects to direct their thoughts at objects which may or may not exist in the mind-independent reality.

The purified theory: Every mental phenomenon can be analyzed as a quasi-relational feature that enables subjects to direct their thoughts at objects which may or may not exist in the mind-independent reality.

Given the simple-mindedness of the naive theory, one might think that a choice has to be made only between the other two candidates. For Brentano, this may indeed have been the choice. But there are other considerations, as we shall see later, that seem to give the naive theory a fresh start too. First, however, let us consider some of the obvious objections that the immanence theory has to meet.

4. *Two objections to the immanence theory*

As I said at the beginning, most philosophers today regard the immanence theory as being only of historical interest, having been refuted once and forever. If one looks at the objections that are thought to be fatal to the theory, however, this claim seems quite premature. On closer inspection these arguments are not nearly as impressive as they first appear. One of these objections – which I call the absurdity objection – can be dismissed rather quickly because it concerns only the naive version of the theory and hence cannot refute the immanence theory as a whole. A second objection – which I call the ‘explanatory objection’ – deserves closer scrutiny, but in the end it too is unable to refute the immanence theory entirely.

The first objection is that the immanence theory has such absurd consequences that any further discussion of it is pointless. It leads to a form of epistemological idealism according to which the only entities that we can think about are the immanent objects that exist in our own minds. The common-sense view that our thoughts are directed at entities in a mind-independent reality would therefore be nothing but a massive illusion. Our thoughts would be imprisoned in our own mind, as one might say. This, so the argument goes, is a clear case of a *reductio ad absurdum*.

This objection is familiar from the theory of perception. There it is the standard objection against introducing ‘sense data’ as the immediate objects of a perceptual experience. Here is a typical example in which the critics also try to explain how Brentano may have been misled into adopting a theory with such counter-intuitive consequences:

Brentano’s conception of intentionality as directedness to an intramental object is unsatisfactory, for it implies that the object of one’s perception of, say, the sun is not the heavenly body itself but some image in one’s mind.

However, it is easy to understand how Brentano arrived at this conception. The aim of his psychology was to describe mental phenomena such as they appear to the person who experiences them or ‘lives through’ them: not as they appear to an external observer. What is really present to the mind, we might now say, is the presentation (*Vorstellung*) or idea of the sun, not the sun itself. From this correct premiss, however, he mistakenly infers that the mind is directed to this presentation or idea, i.e. to what Brentano called the content or the object of the mental act. (Sajama and Kamppinen 1987, p.28)

The claim here is that Brentano arrived at the immanence theory by an invalid inference. And indeed the inference as it is described here is clearly fallacious. From the assumption that intramental objects are the immediate objects of perception it does not follow that these entities are the *only* entities that we perceive. An additional premise is needed to draw this conclusion. What this premise might be is suggested in the last sentence of the above quote. The argument works only if one sets aside the distinction between the ‘content’ and the ‘object’ of a perception. Either one has to ignore the fact that one can see the same object in various ways, e.g. when one looks at it from different angles, or one has to argue that in such cases one always sees two different objects, not one object in different perspectives.

Since, however, the content/object distinction seems so inevitable in the case of perceptions, one cannot avoid the impression that the position criticized by Sajama and Kamppinen is a mere strawman. There is absolutely no reason to attribute this view to Brentano, i.e. the view that perceptions consist of *nothing else* but a relation to an

immanent object. This is what the naive theory would tell us if we applied it to perceptions. This clearly goes against all our intuitions, but as long as one does not apply the immanence theory in this simple-minded way, the theory is not discredited by this objection.

Let me, therefore, turn to a second and more plausible objection that applies also to the sophisticated version of the theory. This objection questions the explanatory power of the theory and can be stated as follows: any theory of intentionality has to explain how it is possible that some of our thoughts are directed at objects that exist in reality, while other thoughts are directed at objects that do not exist in reality. But how can the mind be directed both at existing and non-existing things? This problem is left completely unresolved by the immanence theory. The theory therefore simply lacks the explanatory power that we require of a theory of intentionality.

This objection has gained its reputation again from the work of Chisholm. He connects it with an important observation about the ambiguity of the term ‘intentional’. When this term is used in complex phrases like ‘intentional object’, it can have an ‘ontological’ or a ‘psychological’ meaning. Taken in an ontological sense the ‘intentional objects’ are the immanent objects that exist in the mind; taken psychologically the term ‘intentional object’ does not denote an object at all, but rather a mental episode that has the quasi-relational feature of being directed at an object in the real world. Having clarified this difference, Chisholm claims that the two uses of the term ‘intentional’ are in conflict with each other, and that this causes a problem for the immanence theory:

If the doctrine of intentional inexistence is true, the very fact that Diogenes was looking for an honest man implies that he already had the immanent object; hence *it* could not be the object of his quest. Thus Brentano was later to say that “what we think about is *the object* or *thing* and not the ‘object of thought’ (das vorgestellte Objekt).

The ontological use of the word ‘intentional’, therefore, seems to undermine its psychological use. Intentionally inexistent objects were posited in the attempt to understand intentional reference, but the attempt did not succeed – precisely

because the objects so posited *were* intentionally inexistent. (Chisholm 1970, p.139)

The first part of this passage merely repeats the absurdity objection with a different example: if the immanence theory were correct, it would be nonsense for Diogenes to look for an honest man, since the only thing he could look for would be an immanent object, and he does not have to look for that object since it is already present in his mind. But Chisholm rightly hesitates to attribute this view to Brentano. His real point is a quite different one: if we want to understand what happens in the mind of Diogenes when he is looking for somebody, it is no help to be told that there is an intramental object, like an image, existing in his mind. On the contrary, as soon as one introduces such an intramental entity it becomes even harder to understand how a mental reference to an object in the real world is made .

Is this a good objection to the immanence theory of intentionality? I do not think so. To see this, take the classical theory of propositional attitudes according to which beliefs and desires are relations between subjects and propositions. When I believe or desire that Diogenes finds an honest man, I am related to the proposition expressed by the sentence “Diogenes finds an honest man”. Suppose now one would raise the above objection to this way of analyzing beliefs and desires: introducing propositions as objects of beliefs and desires does not help to explain how these attitudes are related to the real world. On the contrary, these abstract objects make it even harder, if not impossible, to understand how propositional attitudes can be about objects in the real world.

Clearly, this would be a misguided objection. Whatever one might say against propositions, these entities are certainly not without explanatory value. When we know what the proposition is that constitutes the content of someone’s beliefs and desires, then we also know what has to be the case if the belief is true or the desire is satisfied. And we know what has to be the case for a belief or desire to be about a particular individual in the real world. In the present example there must be a person who was given the name “Diogenes” either by his contemporaries or by some later persons who had sufficient knowledge to identify him, and his name must have been handed down to us in such a way that we can still use it for referring to the same individual. If these

conditions are satisfied, then the proposition expressed by the sentence “Diogenes found an honest man” will be about a particular person, otherwise not.

The explanatory power that can be found in a theory that appeals to propositions also must be credited to a theory of intentionality that appeals to immanent objects. There is no reason why an intramental entity could not fix the satisfaction conditions of a belief in the same way as an abstract proposition does. Hence, the explanatory objection does not pose a real threat to the immanence theory either. This objection, however, does point in the right direction. It will lead us to see what is really wrong with the immanence theory.

5. Immanent objects and subjective experiences

Accounting for the fact that our thoughts are directed at a mind-independent reality is one thing that we demand from a theory of intentionality. In this respect, I have argued that the immanence theory is no worse off than other theories that consider mental phenomena as relations between subjects and entities, like abstract propositions, that function as the content of our thoughts. All these theories must be able to explain how such entities can fix the satisfaction conditions of our beliefs and desires and how they can direct our thoughts at specific individuals and their properties in the real world. There is no *specific* objection here that one might raise against the immanence theory alone.

But there are other things that a theory of intentionality should be able to explain. In particular, it should be able to explain how it is possible that subjects can have the same beliefs and desires repeatedly at various times, and how it is possible that different subjects can share the same beliefs and desires at the same time or at different times. In this respect the prospects of the immanence theory do not look so good. This is not surprising, since the ontology of abstract propositions has been invented in part in order to account for the objectivity of our beliefs. Bolzano and Frege took this objectivity to consist in the fact that beliefs are true or false independently of the question whose beliefs they are. It does not matter whether the American president or the Russian president believes that democracy is the best form of government, if it is the best form of government then they are both right, and if it is not, then they are both

wrong. This strongly encourages the view that different subjects can literally share the same beliefs, desires and other mental attitudes. It is the very same belief that different politicians have when they believe in democracy as the best form of government.

How might the immanence theory account for the objectivity of our beliefs? According to this theory, different subjects can literally share the same belief only if they are related to the same immanent object. This requires that the same immanent object would have to exist in the mind of different subjects, and this seems impossible, or at least difficult to explain. An advocate of the theory should therefore say that beliefs and other mental attitudes cannot literally be shared in the sense that the very same belief can occur more than once in the same or in different subjects. There are only *similar* beliefs with *similar* immanent objects that prompt us to speak of ‘the same’ belief. But this immediately raises the questions, what the standard of similarity here is, and how similar immanent objects must be such that if a belief containing one of these immanent objects is true, a belief containing the other immanent object is true as well. The problem with these immanent objects is not that they are an ‘idle wheel’ which does no explanatory work, the problem is that they raise questions which look very much like pseudo-questions that cannot be answered. This should be reason enough for giving up the immanence theory as philosophically unsatisfactory.

But even this objection does not refute the immanence theory completely. The objection may in fact be taken as a hint to where the real value of this theory lies. Thus an advocate of the immanence theory may respond to it by pointing out that it is a peculiarity of cognitive and conative mental states that they can be shared by different people. But not all mental phenomena are of this kind. The American president can have a headache that is similar to the headache of the Russian president, and both can be happy, sad or jealous. In this case, too, one might say that they ‘share’ a pain or that they have a common feeling. But the sense in which they ‘share’ a mental phenomenon seems quite different in this case. Feelings, emotions and sensations are *subjective* experiences that cannot be literally shared in the way in which cognitive and conative attitudes can. This is exactly what constitutes their subjectivity and what needs to be accounted for by a theory of experience.

Thus we arrive at the following suggestion: The peculiarity of subjective experiences like pain, happiness or jealousy shows that explanatory work can be done

by the immanence theory of intentionality. This theory explains the fact that subjective experiences cannot literally be shared by the fact that they involve a relation to an immanent object. Immanent objects exist only in a single mind at the very time at which they are experienced. They are like the individual properties, called ‘tropes’, that can be exemplified only once by a single individual. Moreover, introducing immanent objects may be useful in explaining the qualitative character of these phenomena, the ‘what it is like’-aspect of our sensations and feelings. They might have all the ‘qualia’ characteristic of a subjective experience and thus distinguish it from all other experiences of the same kind.¹⁷

Do these considerations show that there is still a – perhaps even a large – kernel of truth in the immanence theory? One philosopher who thinks so is Dale Jacquette. Without mentioning its name he clearly defends the immanence theory along the lines just described when he suggests the following ‘new’ approach to a general theory of intentionality:

This new approach suggests a distinction between the intentionality of perception and the intentionality of sensation. It is possible to see particular colored objects, but it is also possible to see colors themselves. The same is true of the objects of the other senses. [...]

When experience is directed at phenomenally qualified objects, it exemplifies the intentionality of perception rather than the intentionality of sensation. [...] But if the subject merely sees the color blue [...] then the subject is directed in thought toward a shade of blue (a particular sensation or secondary quality) as the intentional object of sensation. If this distinction holds for all phenomenal experience, then the intentionality of perception may be reducible to the intentionality of sensations, even if perceptual objects cannot be reduced to sensations or clusters of sensations in a sense-data or phenomenalist epistemology. (Jacquette 1985, p.436)

¹⁷ The term ‘qualia’ is often used today in a less strict sense that does not commit one to the view that qualia are immanent objects. This looser talk of ‘qualia’ may be less objectionable, but it also makes the appeal to qualia less interesting, since it does not allow one to explain the subjectivity of mental experiences by the fact that each experience includes an entity that – being an individual object – can only exist once. For this reason the strict use of this term is recommended in Lycan (1987).

Immanent objects are invoked here to explain a fundamental difference between two kinds of mental phenomena, namely perceptions and sensations. The proposal is that phenomenally qualified objects, like a blue flower that is perceived in the mind-independent world, must be distinguished from sense-data (or secondary qualities) to which we are related in sensation. These sense-data exist even in the case of a misperception when we merely seem to perceive a blue flower, but when in fact we only perceive a certain shade of color shaped in a flower-like way.

It is noteworthy that Jacquette defends here not the sophisticated version of the immanence theory that we encountered earlier in Brentano's writings; rather he provides a line of defence for the *naive* theory by restricting it to the realm of sensory experiences. This can be seen from the fact that, according to Jacquette, the familiar contrast between the content and the object of a mental representation can be drawn only in the case of perceptions. We can clearly distinguish between the flower in the real world and the content of a mental phenomenon that occurs when we perceive the flower. In the case of a sensation, however, no such contrast can be drawn. Jacquette makes this point first with respect to pain and then generalizes it to all sensations:

[...] pain as the object of sensation is also the content of the psychological experience of pain. The content and object of sensation in that case are not numerically distinct but strictly identical. (Jacquette 1985, p.437)

To revive the immanence theory of intentionality as a theory of subjective experience seems like an attractive idea. It would yield us a two-fold theory of intentionality – one for cognitive phenomena like perceptions, and one for subjective experiences like sensations – and it would thereby provide a new basis for Brentano's thesis that all mental phenomena are intentional in one sense or another. Despite the criticism that this thesis has received, it remains one of the few options we have when we try to characterize mental phenomena as a distinctive class of phenomena. This makes it tempting for Jacquette to use a restricted version of the immanence theory in defence of this doctrine. But is it a temptation to which we should succumb?

The immanence theory comes at the price that it requires the acceptance of immanent objects in one's ontology. Either one has to accept immanent objects as

entities that are not part of reality at all, or one has to accept them as a special kind of ‘mental entities’ that are clearly distinguishable from mental events, states and processes. In the first case one must sacrifice a principle of Realism according to which everything that exists is part of reality, in the second case one has to sacrifice a principle of Naturalism according to which all basic entities are physical elements and all non-basic entities are determined by the physical structure of the world. Are these metaphysical principles a price that we should pay for buying the immanence theory?

If all we gain thereby is a new way of defending the thesis that all mental phenomena are intentional, the answer is clearly “No”. It is certainly desirable to have a principled way of distinguishing mental phenomena from all other phenomena, but it is not a goal that can justify giving up Realism or Naturalism. The more reasonable move in this case would be to give up the idea that there is a general criterion of the mental.

This leaves us with the claim that the immanence theory accounts for the subjectivity of our experiences and thus explains how experiences differ from cognitive and conative mental states. That the theory provides such an explanation cannot be denied. The question, however, is whether it provides the *only* explanation, and whether it provides *the best* explanation for the characteristic feature of our experiences.

Here too, I think the answer is negative. The subjectivity of our experiences can be explained equally well by a theory that does not appeal to immanent objects. For instance, experiences can be analyzed as higher-order mental phenomena directed at first-order mental phenomena occurring in the same subject. According to this theory, my feeling of pain would be a subjective experience because it is a complex phenomenon consisting of two parts: there is a first-order mental event, namely a pain in my body, and there is a second-order mental event, namely my experiencing of this first-order mental event. This first-order pain may then be further analyzed as an intentional phenomenon that is directed at some injury or disfunction in my body. What makes the whole experience a subjective experience of mine is the fact that its higher-order part is directed at something that is *de facto* present in my body. Even if the very same first-order pain might occur in the mind of another subject, my second-order experience would still be directed at *my* pain and not at the pain of another person. This

makes my subjective experience as different from someone else's experiences as a belief about the Statue of Liberty is different from a belief about the Eiffel Tower.¹⁸

This is not the place to work out such a theory of subjective experience in detail. The above sketch of such a theory suffices, I hope, to demonstrate that the subjectivity of experiences can be explained without appealing to immanent objects. If this is so, however, then no clear advantage of this theory remains that could justify the metaphysical price which must be paid for it .

6. *Conclusion*

The immanence theory is widely considered to be an outdated theory of intentionality. In this paper I have tried to show that it is not so much the theory, but the standard objections to this theory that are outdated. If the theory is unacceptable, this must be demonstrated by a more convincing argument. I have tried to show what it takes to develop such an argument. First one has to show that the immanence theory is inappropriate for cognitive and conative mental attitudes, since it cannot explain the objectivity of these phenomena. Second, it has to be shown that the theory is equally unable to explain the subjectivity of experiences. This second step rests on the assumption that certain principles of Realism and Naturalism that exclude an ontology of immanent objects should not be dismissed lightly. Philosophers in the phenomenological tradition may disagree with this assumption. From their point of view, therefore, nothing might be wrong with the immanence theory itself, only with its application to mental phenomena outside the realm of subjective experience.¹⁹

¹⁸ The theory of subjective experiences sketched here has certain affinities with Brentano's explanation of inner consciousness arising from mental phenomena that are simultaneously accompanied by an inner awareness of themselves. For a recent discussion, whether this theory should be worked out in terms of a first-order or higher-order theory, see Thomasson (2000).

¹⁹ I am grateful to Glenn Stanley for improving the English of this text.

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