

JOHANNES L. BRANDL

## Brentano's Renewal of Philosophy: A Double-Edged Sword

### 1. Introduction

Brentano did not leave behind a *magnum opus* containing the sum of his thought. The *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, doubtless his most important work, remained unfinished; and even if Brentano had finished it, one would not get a complete view of his philosophy from it alone. The *Psychology* does not reveal the deeper motivations that were driving his project of renewing philosophy. According to the interpretation presented here, Brentano's project had two goals. First, Brentano wanted to restore the reputation of philosophy as a scientific discipline, which it had at the time of Aristotle, Descartes, Locke, and Leibniz. He held that philosophy should take a problem-oriented approach and follow the same rules of reasoning as the empirical sciences. The second goal that Brentano pursued is more specific. Like the great masters of the past, Brentano assigned to philosophy the task of addressing what he refers to as "the highest questions" of metaphysics: the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and the problem of evil. This second goal may seem remote from his work in psychology, but it is a deep motif that surfaces at various places — and in different stages — of his philosophical output.

Hence the question arises: Are these goals compatible? This is the question I will address, taking into account both Brentano's biography and textual evidence. To answer it, one must first consider the influence that Brentano's Catholic background had on his project of renewing philosophy. Was this influence merely accidental and restricted to Brentano's early

period, as many scholars believe, or more substantial and enduring? Second, there is Brentano's view of the history of philosophy, according to which philosophical progress has taken place only in short periods, followed by relatively long periods of decline. Was this conception of progress in philosophy shaped by Brentano's theological interests? Finally, there are various documents in which Brentano describes his vision of a scientific approach to metaphysical questions. These documents leave no doubt that Brentano strongly believed in a religious version of *philosophia perennis*. But how is that compatible with his other goal? After collecting the evidence, we will see why the renewal of philosophy envisaged by Brentano — like a double-edged sword — may not cut both ways: It may either satisfy those who share a religious world view, but disappoint those who regard philosophy as a truly scientific discipline, or the other way around. 5 10

To bring to light this tension in Brentano's conception of philosophy, I will proceed as follows: Section 2 introduces the model of philosophical progress that Brentano sets forth in *The Four Phases of Philosophy and its Current State* (1895). Sections 3 and 4 make explicit the principles on which this model rests, by drawing on Brentano's *Habilitation* theses (1866) and on his essay on *Auguste Comte* (1869). As these early texts reveal, Brentano's plan for renewing philosophy was intimately connected with a Catholic revival movement with which he was affiliated in his youth. The rest of the paper takes up the question as to what remains of this connection in Brentano's later writings. Section 5 examines passages in Brentano's *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, indicating Brentano's plan to address metaphysical questions in later (unpublished) parts of this work. Section 6 closes by presenting corroborating evidence that Brentano never gave up the plan to combine a positivist view of science with a theistic worldview. How this plan fares — even by Brentano's own standards — remains to be seen. 15 20 25

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## 2. The idea of progress in philosophy

Throughout his career, Brentano referred to Aristotle as his “main teacher” in philosophy.<sup>1</sup> While this makes Brentano a neo-Aristotelian of some sort, 35

<sup>1</sup> For a survey of Brentano's work on Aristotle, see George (1978), (1986) und Volpi (1989).

his fascination with Aristotle ran deeper than the purely scholarly interest that would inspire historians. In his polemical exchange with Zeller (see George 1980) and later in a letter to Oskar Kraus from March 1916, for example, Brentano explains that Aristotle's problem-oriented style impressed  
 5 him. Believing that he was living in an "age of miserable decline" (Brentano 1966, 291), Brentano came to trust Aristotle's philosophy on the grounds that "there is so much truth and depth" in his thinking (see Stumpf 1919, 98). Consequently, Brentano developed the idea of renewing philosophy by infusing it with Aristotelian principles, especially methodological principles. In addition, Brentano developed a conception of the history of philosophy that supported his neo-Aristotelian orientation. Brentano presents this vision in his lectures on the history of philosophy, which he regularly taught in Würzburg from 1866-1873, and later in Vienna from 1874 until 1883.<sup>2</sup> There Brentano also points out certain regularities in the way that  
 10 philosophy developed since antiquity; and from this, he draws conclusions about how philosophy should proceed.

His career as a university teacher abruptly ended for personal reasons in the winter term of 1894/95. As a former priest, Brentano had become involved in a bitter struggle with authorities in Vienna about regaining his  
 20 professorship, as he had been forced to give it up together with his citizenship when he decided to marry. Upon realizing that he had lost the battle, Brentano decided to quit. He made his decision to leave Vienna public during a talk to the Literary Society in Vienna in November 1894. The society had just published a book by Alfred Lorm and asked Brentano for his opinion on it, which explains the original title of his lecture: "On Optimism and  
 25 Pessimism".<sup>3</sup>

In the opening part of his lecture, Brentano describes Lorm as a "man of his age" who carried on the pessimistic tendency that had taken hold of German philosophy since Kant (Brentano 1968f, engl. transl. 84). Lorm  
 30 merely gave this tendency an ironic new name: "groundless optimism". Brentano does not spend much time explaining Lorm's view or its relation-

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<sup>2</sup> According to the list of lectures in (Werle 1998, 156ff.), Brentano taught a course on "History of Philosophy" six times between 1866-1873. In Vienna, he was teaching a  
 35 course on Ancient Philosophy (1874), a course on Aristotle (1877) and a course on the "Philosophy of the History of Philosophy" (1878, 1880, 1883).

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Guillaume Fréchette for pointing this out to me.

ship to the broader cultural movement of *Weltschmerz* (world-weariness). Instead, he quickly moves on to contrast the type of philosophy that one finds in writers like Lorm with his own ideas about the history of philosophy. Brentano divides history not into historical epochs, but into repeating phases with one of four characteristic features:<sup>4</sup>

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Phase 1: flourishing theoretical interest

Phase 2: mixing of theoretical with practical interests

Phase 3: insecurity and scepticism

Phase 4: common sense thinking, pseudo-rationalism, mysticism

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How one evaluates Brentano's model depends on whether one takes it to be merely a suggestive idea or a systematic position concerning the entire history of philosophy. While some of Brentano's claims are speculative and radical, his general idea may be more readily acceptable. Keeping this in mind, let us briefly consider some of the problematic claims that Brentano advances.

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First, there is the question of the model's historical validity. Brentano claims that the four phases manifest themselves cyclically in the history of philosophy's development. Flourishing phases characterize the periods from Thales to Aristotle, from the Patristics to Thomas Aquinas, and the early modern period from Bacon to Leibniz. All other periods in the history of philosophy, according to Brentano, have been phases of decline. In response, one might object that it is far from clear that one can characterize entire periods of the history of philosophy in such broad terms. One would think that progressive thoughts as well as short-lived ideas can be found throughout the history of philosophy. Indeed, one and the same author, or even one and the same text, may count as progressive in certain respects and antiquated in others. Similar considerations also undermine Brentano's attack on German Idealism and his claim that philosophy reached a decisive turning point during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One may agree that the demise of German Idealism was irreversible, contrary to what late representatives of this view, like Lorm, believed; yet that observation is not

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<sup>4</sup> Stumpf reports that already as a student Brentano had conceived of the history of philosophy as a cyclical process involving periods of progression and periods of decline (see Stumpf 1919, 89). The first published version of his model can be found in Brentano's contribution to Adam Möhler's *Kirchengeschichte*. Regensburg 1867-1870, 526-584.

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sufficient to warrant speaking of a turning point in the history of philosophy. Brentano's hope for a grand renewal of philosophy thus seems rather too optimistic, based as it is on the view that philosophy reached another shift from Phase 4 to Phase 1.

5 Fortunately, there is a less radical side to Brentano's historical views. In the concluding section of his lecture, Brentano mentions three principles that one should observe to make progress in philosophy:

- a) One should exhibit a purely theoretical interest.
- 10 b) One should learn from disciplines outside of philosophy.
- c) One should approach with optimism the highest questions of metaphysics.

The first two principles are reminiscent of Brentano's inaugural lecture, 15 "Über die Gründe der Entmutigung auf philosophischem Gebiet (1874)." There he appeals to progress in the natural sciences as providing inspiration for philosophy (see Brentano 1968d, 98f.). But what about Brentano's third principle? What special resilience does Brentano mean to invoke with it?

Three perennial questions of metaphysics come into play here: Does 20 reality have a creator? Is there eternal life? Why is there so much evil in a world created by God? In light of these questions, the controversy about "optimism" and "pessimism" in philosophy takes on a theological meaning. It also becomes clear why Brentano considers Kant's view to be pessimistic: Kant doubts that one can answer these questions in a straightforward way. 25 He takes the questions of speculative metaphysics to be beyond the human mind and therefore rephrases them as questions of transcendental philosophy. Brentano opposes such defeatism. Quoting Goethe's remark that "science is 'the highest faculty of man'", Brentano puts his trust in science as the faculty that "has often led him further than he had ever hoped in his 30 wildest dreams, and so may it be the case even in relation to those highest questions" (Brentano 1968f, 28f., engl. transl. from Mezei and Smith, 107). Brentano then states what these highest questions are:

35 Without knowing what the essence of matter is, we have nonetheless established that matter is essentially incorruptible; without knowing what the essence of mind is, we might yet be able to show that we have a well-grounded hope that the soul enjoys everlasting existence. Without know-

ing the essence of the first cause of the material world, we still may work through to a rational conviction that the world is determined for the best – by this cause. (Brentano 1968 f., 29, transl. amended, 107 f.).<sup>5</sup>

The methodological attitude that Brentano recommends involves both modesty and courage. There may be certain things we know that we cannot know; yet we can discern some of the essential properties of matter, ascertainable as they are by the scientific method. The situation is similar with respect to the questions about the immortality of the soul and the existence of a benevolent creator. We should also approach these questions with a scientific attitude and the confidence that we will be able to answer them.

As the *Neue Freie Presse* reported on November 28, 1894, Brentano's lecture earned great applause. How far the audience agreed with his views, including his radical historical claims, we do not know. Presumably not everyone knew what to make of the theological implications of Brentano's lecture. To assess these implications, one must take into account Brentano's previous career as a theologian.

### 3. Brentano's Catholic background 20

Brentano's interests as a student of philosophy closely intertwined with his interests in theology. After completing his dissertation in 1862, Brentano continued studying theology in Munich and Würzburg, where he was ordained as Catholic priest in August 1864. His decision to take the holy orders is partly explained by his family background. Both his father and mother, as well as his uncle Clemens and aunt Bettina von Armin, were devout Catholics and had excellent connections to high representatives of the Church. But there may have been other reasons, besides his family bonds, that influenced Brentano's decision to become a Catholic priest.

Recent research on this question suggests that Brentano was involved with the Catholic renewal movement that flourished in southern Germany

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<sup>5</sup> In view of this passage we may assume that Brentano has these three questions in mind also in other places when he does not explicitly state them, for instance when he speaks of the "great and rich tasks" that await philosophy in the realm of metaphysics. (See Brentano 1968d, 96).

during the second half of the 19th century.<sup>6</sup> The key feature of this movement was “devotional activism” across a range of different activities: press, politics, worker’s associations, etc. For scholars, the movement entailed re-vamping Catholic science based on a “determined critique of secular thought and what they perceived as its tendency to denigrate and erode religious faith” (Schaefer 2007, 482). Articles supporting this idea were published in academic journals like *Der Katholik* with the programmatic subtitle: *A journal for Catholic Wissenschaft and ecclesiastical life*. At present, it is difficult to determine the extent to which Brentano agreed with the tenets of this movement, though it may become clear once his letters and autobiographical notes become available. Even then, however, one must consider whether these documents contain embellishments from Brentano’s own hand (see Tiefensee 1998, 58f.).<sup>7</sup>

We know for sure that Brentano enthusiastically supported his teacher in Münster, Franz J. Clemens, who was part of the Catholic renewal movement and contributed to *The Katholik*. When Brentano praises him as a man “who has the courage to withstand the fashions of the day” (see Münch 2004, 178), he may mean that Clemens was willing to take medieval thinkers seriously at a time when this was scorned by many throughout Germany, including liberal Catholics like Ignaz von Döllinger. That said, Brentano may also mean to refer to the Ultramontanist movement with which Clemens sympathized, and which was highly controversial at the time. In his article “Unser Standpunkt in der Philosophie”, Clemens argues that members of the Roman Catholic Church must respect Roman authorities when they speak on matters of both religion and philosophy. These views of his favored teacher, which Brentano must have known, should give us pause in evaluating the statement against Papal infallibility that Brentano drafted for the Bishop of Mainz. A careful reading of the question addressed in Brentano’s statement shows that it was not directly concerned with the truth

<sup>6</sup> The connection to this movement is mentioned in Tiefensee (1998), Münch (2004) and Albertazzi (2006). For a deeper appraisal of the nature of this movement and Brentano’s place in it, see Schaefer (2007) and (2013). The influence of theology on Brentano’s thinking is also well-documented in Burgess (1974), Hennemann (1977) and Krantz-Gabriel (2004).

<sup>7</sup> More needs to be known also about Brentano’s hopes to claim a position at a Catholic University that was in planning, but that never came into existence due to a lack of resources.



and justification of the infallibility claim, but rather with the question as to whether that claim would be timely (“zeitgemäß”) and opportune, given the tenuous state of Catholicism in Germany.<sup>8</sup> Brentano’s negative answer therefore turns on the so-called “*Kulturkampf*” in which German Catholics found themselves. In this situation one would not want to teach students a dogma that they would find difficult to square with widely shared views about personal responsibility and self-determination. When the Pope announced the dogma in 1870, Brentano gave up his position at the University, resigned from his priesthood, and eventually left the Catholic Church.<sup>9</sup>

Did this personal turmoil have a major impact on Brentano’s views on religion and philosophy? Contrary to what one might expect — and what is often assumed — his philosophical and theological views remained essentially unchanged. The first piece of evidence for such continuity arises from comparing the methodological principles that Brentano introduced at the end of his 1895 lecture with assertions that he defended during his *Habilitation* in 1866. Brentano’s first seven theses are pertinent to this comparison, though for expository purposes I will momentarily set aside the second and third:<sup>10</sup>

1. Philosophy must protest against a division of the sciences into speculative and exact sciences, and the legitimacy of this protest gives philosophy the right to exist.
4. The true method of philosophy is none other than that of the natural sciences.
5. The plurality of things in the world refutes pantheism, and the unity of the world refutes atheism.
6. Kant is mistaken when he claims that the physico-theological proof of God is a proof only for an intelligence that produces order, but not for an intelligence that creates.

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<sup>8</sup> Brentano’s statement against the dogma of infallibility has also other interesting aspects to it. It touches on epistemological questions related to the conflict between a collective and a subjective way of forming opinions. His argument against the infallibility of a single person may therefore be regarded as supporting a (Catholic) preference for epistemological collectivism over a (Protestant) subjectivism. See Schaefer 2007, 491.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed account of the political and historical circumstances of this legal battle, see Schaefer (forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> Brentano defended all in all 25 theses. The translations are my own.



7. Kant is also mistaken when he contends that, from the fact that God is the creator of the world, it does not follow that he is an infinitely perfect being.

5 Despite the strong influence of Catholicism evident in these claims, there are strong parallels between Brentano's earlier and later positions. Indeed, the claims are consistent with the methodological principles that Brentano defended in his 1895 lecture.

10 Consider, first, the principle that philosophy flourishes whenever it is governed by a purely theoretical interest. This principle is part of Brentano's first thesis, which, contrary to how it is often understood (see, e.g., Benetka 1999), must not be mistaken as expressing a protest against speculative methods in general. Brentano's first thesis concerns the strict separation of speculative and exact sciences (see Sauer 2000). Brentano takes it to  
15 be a sign of decline when one denies that metaphysics can be both speculative and exact. This makes good sense from Brentano's point of view, since philosophy has to take a speculative approach to address questions concerning the existence of God, the immateriality and immortality of the soul, and the problem of evil. Brentano's first thesis, therefore, defends the  
20 compatibility of metaphysics and science.<sup>11</sup>

A similar clarification is needed for Brentano's fourth thesis. One might take it to be a simple and straightforward attack on German idealists like Schelling who hope to supply philosophy with new methods for reaching its speculative goals. According to that reading, Brentano appears to subscribe  
25 to a methodological monism as it came to be promoted by the so-called "unity of science" movement associated with Logical Empiricism. Indeed, advocates of this movement referred to Brentano's claim that the method of philosophy is equivalent to that of the natural sciences as a predecessor of their view (see Neurath, 1981, 302). But the agreement between these distinct  
30 views is superficial.<sup>12</sup> Both reject a form of philosophical speculation that violates basic methodological standards taken from science: evidence must be carefully analysed, concepts must be made precise, and great con-

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35 <sup>11</sup> Philosophy has to restrict itself only in an epistemic sense. Brentano requires a certain epistemic modesty when he denies the possibility of "absolute knowledge" and replaces this ideal with a conception of "relative knowledge". (See Brentano 1968d, 96).

<sup>12</sup> These parallels are emphasized, for instance, in Weingartner 1968 and Haller 1988.

cern must be given to the validity of inferences. The agreement ends there, however; for logical empiricists reject speculative metaphysics *tout court*, while Brentano believes that it is still possible in a renewed form.

This brings us to the contrast that Brentano makes between his own optimistic worldview and the kind of pessimism that prevailed in philosophy during his time. Brentano does not yet employ the term “pessimism” in 1866, yet succinctly describes what he takes to be an important aspect of, or even the basis of, that view. As Brentano sees it, Kant put philosophy on the wrong track by allowing pantheism and atheism to be rationally defensible positions, and by ruling out a physical-theological proof of the existence of God. Since Kant’s transcendental philosophy leads to such a view, it must be replaced by a more powerful philosophical methodology. We find this line of reasoning in both Brentano’s early and later writings, which again corroborates the continuity of his commitment to rational theism.<sup>13</sup> To regard Brentano’s theism as a vestige of an immature faith once held but later abandoned, therefore, would neglect the cogency that Brentano saw in his attack of post-Kantian philosophy.

Let us return to the two theses that I set aside above, which concern Brentano’s view about the relationship between philosophy and theology:

2. Philosophy must protest against the expectation that philosophy should derive its principles from theology, and against the claim that only supernatural revelation makes a fruitful philosophy possible.
3. This fact notwithstanding, theological truths are suited to serve as signposts for philosophical inquiry.

In the second thesis, Brentano seems to say that philosophy and theology are to be conceived as being independent disciplines. In the third thesis, however, he apparently rescinds that claim and allows for theology to serve as a guide to philosophy. Yet it is extremely unlikely that Brentano ever thought philosophy should serve as a handmaiden to theology. Relatedly, Sauer has drawn attention to Kraus’s mistranslation of the Latin term *stella rectrices* (literally “guiding stars”) as “*Fingerzeige*” or “signposts” (see Sauer 2000, 120). The mistranslation obscures the fact that Brentano

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. “Der Atheismus und die Wissenschaft” (1873) and “Über Kants Kritik der Gottesbeweise (1911/12).

may have intended to demonstrate some obedience to Catholic authorities by employing their official terminology. Be that as it may, Brentano publicly supported the independence of philosophy and theology in an article occasioned by the controversial decision to establish a chair for Catholic

5 Philosophy at the University of Strassbourg. In this dispute, Brentano's brother Lujo, among others, criticized the University's attempt to constrain the freedom of philosophy by allowing the Catholic Church to influence which candidates would be selected for a position in philosophy. When this argument was challenged with the counter-argument that no research

10 is "*voraussetzungslos* (without presuppositions)", Brentano raised his voice in defence of his brother and against his cousin Hertling, defending the position of the University.<sup>14</sup> The counter-argument, Brentano replied, is nothing more than sophistry; for there is a significant difference between saying that every inquiry rests on presuppositions, and maintaining that an

15 inquiry is constrained by theological premises. Interestingly, Brentano also appeals to a historical argument. Philosophy can go astray when it bends itself to theology, as in the Middle Ages, when philosophy never had an interest "fully devoted to free and rational inquiry" (Brentano 1968f, 27, engl. translation 106). Decline in philosophy, therefore, is imminent whenever it

20 serves other interests, be they of theology or other disciplines. This historical argument also explains why Brentano spoke out against the rector of the University of Vienna when the latter suggested that philosophy should find its place among the political sciences (See Brentano 1968e).

Let us take stock. We have seen that Brentano's program for renew-

25 ing philosophy rests on a number of positive and negative claims. The negative claims concern mistakes which, according to Brentano, lead to a decline in philosophy; where these mistakes include the dominance of practical interests, scepticism about the powers of the human mind, and a lack of methodological rigour. The positive claims concern the possibility

30 of reviving metaphysics as a discipline that addresses speculative questions about God, immortality, and the problem of evil (among other questions).

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<sup>14</sup> One might argue that Brentano at this point must have changed his mind since 1866. In 1866 he was willing to allow theology to serve as a guide to philosophy, while he now seems opposed to any intervention of theology into philosophy. However, there is also

35 room for a middle position here, according to which philosophy may accept an input from other disciplines, including theology, without thereby becoming constrained by them. This is a position that Brentano might have held throughout.

The negative claims go hand in hand with a sharp criticism of Kant's transcendental philosophy, while the positive claims go hand in hand with a revival of Aristotelian thinking. Taken together, Brentano's claims form a position unique among others in 19<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy. Yet Brentano had allies, too.

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#### 4. Positivism as an ally

Deploing Kant's pervasive influence on German philosophy, Brentano turned to other traditions in contemporary philosophy to support his views, especially the work of English philosophers and psychologists. It may have been John Stuart Mill, as Hedwig conjectures (Hedwig 1987, xxiv), who drew Brentano's attention to the work of Comte. Brentano must have quickly noticed affinities between Comte's positivism and his own project of renewing philosophy. However, one should not infer that Brentano borrowed his views about philosophical progress from Comte, since we know that Brentano developed his four-phase model much earlier (see footnote 4 above). Comte's influence on Brentano is also limited by the fact that their historical models differ in crucial respects. Whereas Comte proposes a three-stage model of intellectual progress from a mythological phase, via a metaphysical phase, to the endpoint of scientific thinking, Brentano advances a four-stage, cyclical model of progress and decline. They also envision the future of philosophy differently. Comte hopes that philosophy will renew itself by drawing inspiration from sociology, a new discipline that he helped to establish, while Brentano hoped to rejuvenate philosophy with the help of psychology, assigning to sociology the rank of a sub-discipline of psychology.<sup>15</sup>

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In what follows, I want to draw attention to another aspect of Comte's positivism that was of key interest to Brentano. Comte believed that faith in humanity might replace faith in God, and he envisaged a new form of religion based on positivist thinking. Brentano took this view to be groundless because belief in God and positivist thinking do not conflict in the first place. This was the major theme of a public lecture on positivism in contem-

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<sup>15</sup> How closely Brentano studied Comte's theory, one can see from the extensive notes he took on Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive*, which Brentano used for teaching (see Brentano 1987a, 246-295).

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porary French philosophy, which Brentano delivered in 1869 and, fittingly, published in *Chilianeum*, a journal for “Catholic science, art, and life”.<sup>16</sup> Yet Brentano’s critical evaluation of Comte’s view was not simply a consequence of his early affiliation with the Catholic Church. We can see this from the

5 fact that Brentano’s views on Comte did not change after Brentano left the Church. In a later manuscript, dating from 1907, he reiterates his criticism that Comte’s views on religion are confused and superficial: “Comte’s positivistic mistake could lead only to a rudimentary product that fails to do justice to essential demands. As much as he is mimicking the Catholic Church,

10 the essence is missing” (Brentano 1954, 85, my translation).

Brentano’s interest in Comte was thus grounded in both basic sympathy with his view and the ambition to show how it fails. The beginning of Brentano’s lecture sets the tone by mentioning that Comte is “not a theist”. From this, Brentano says, it follows that Comte “rules out from the

15 domain of scientific inquiry exactly those questions that must belong to the core of a Christian Philosophy.” (Brentano 1968c, 99).<sup>17</sup> Hence the audience can surmise what Brentano is after: he aims to show that, even if there are important insights to be found in positivist philosophy, it is not a view to recommend. Towards the end of his essay, Brentano confirms this gloss by

20 first acknowledging that “Comte shows clear insights into the shortcomings of our [present day] philosophy and the maladies of our time”, but then adding that “Comte’s errors are massive, yet they are a witness of great truths. The failure of his attempt is complete, but in its own way it is the best proof for the divineness of the Church.” (Brentano 1968c, 101).

25 Setting aside the last part of this weighty conclusion, I want to focus on Brentano’s attempt to show that positivism is compatible with a theistic worldview. As mentioned before, Comte holds the view that human

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30 <sup>16</sup> The publication in *Chilianeum* was announced as the “first article”, which means that one or more articles were intended to follow that, however, never appeared because the journal had to shut down in the following year. Manuscripts in Brentano’s *Nachlass* (convolute H 48) reveal how Brentano had conceived the entire series (see Werle 1989, 37ff). Werle raises the interesting question why Brentano did not attempt to publish this material elsewhere. He surmises that there was a systemic problem that prevented Brentano from doing so, namely the problem how to refute Comte’s claim about an

35 incompatibility of science and theology if one accepts, like Brentano did, a positivistic attitude in some form or other. (See Werle 1989, 39, fn. 68).

<sup>17</sup> All translations from the essay on Comte are my own.

thought developed from a mythological phase, via a phase of metaphysical thinking, to a phase of positive thinking. The term “positive,” for Comte, means the same as the term “scientific”. Consequently, on Comte’s model, there can be no proper science before we reach the third phase. What distinguishes scientific thinking from earlier forms of thinking is the fact that science focuses on relations between observable phenomena, instead of speculating about principles that transcend our experience. Scientific progress therefore seems to lead away from a theistic worldview — not so, from Brentano’s point of view.

First, Brentano draws attention to the fact that Comte’s critique of theological and metaphysical thinking rests on the premise that, in its pre-scientific form, human thinking is “soaked through” with narratives about fictitious entities invented by the mind. Most religions ascribe to their God (or gods) powers that are modeled on human powers. Brentano agrees that religious thinking is contaminated with anthropomorphism and that similar problems arise in metaphysics (see Brentano 1968c, 106f.). Mentioning as examples Aristotle’s conceptions of act and potency, and of substance and accident, respectively, Brentano dismisses metaphysical theories that introduce non-real entities for explanatory purposes. (Brentano 1968c, 132). However, Brentano resolutely denies that the explanatory use of fictitious entities is an essential feature of theology or metaphysics. In this way, he leaves open the possibility that theology and metaphysics can reach Comte’s positive phase of scientific thinking (ibid. 127).<sup>18</sup>

Interestingly, Brentano does not mention the fact that scientists also invent entities for explanatory purposes, such as theoretical entities that are not directly observable. This shows that Brentano’s objections pertain specifically to inventions made in religious or metaphysical contexts. In contrast to scientific theories, these disciplines invent entities for not only explanatory reasons, but for guiding our lives. What Brentano finds objectionable is this mixture of practical and theoretical interests. What may be acceptable for making human life meaningful, or for sustaining a normative order, is not necessarily acceptable from a purely theoretical standpoint. To this de-

<sup>18</sup> Brentano makes heavy use of this distinction in “Der Atheismus und die Wissenschaft”, a lengthy newspaper article, in which he rebuts atheistic arguments with the claim that religious thinking is only historically, but not essentially committed to a form of anthropomorphism (see Brentano 1873).

gree, but only to this degree, Brentano would agree with Comte that positive thinking is incompatible with theological and metaphysical thinking.

- Brentano's second argument turns on the question as to whether positivism is a form of skepticism. Brentano denies that it is. When Comte  
 5 declares science to be concerned only with phenomena given in experience, and not a reality underlying these experiences, he does not argue, as does Hume, that nothing can be known about the causes of our experiences. Brentano takes "knowledge" to mean knowledge by demonstration, not just probabilistic knowledge that even a sceptic like Hume might allow.  
 10 Comte avoids such skepticism, Brentano argues, by undercutting the Kantian distinction between phenomena and things-in-themselves. We can gain knowledge about real things by studying phenomena, because studying phenomena just means to target reality from our point of view, i.e., from how it is "positively" given to us in experience (Brentano 1968c, 114).  
 15 Consequently, the term "relative knowledge" that Brentano introduces in this context must not be confused with a form of epistemic relativism. This is important because Brentano intends to use his interpretation of Comte to support a particular form of religious knowledge. God is not like a thing-in-itself hidden from view. He is a real thing that we can come to  
 20 know — from our point of view — by experiencing the impressive order evident in the phenomena caused by God's creation.

- Brentano's argument goes quickly; he does not seem to be aware that it rests on a controversial premise. What justifies the assumption that we can gain knowledge about a super-natural cause in the same way in which  
 25 we can gain knowledge about natural causes? Positivism seems to require a clear distinction between *natural* and *non-natural* connections, which makes Brentano's inference doubtful.

- Thus, much hangs on Brentano's third argument for his claim that positivism and theism are compatible. The argument once again builds upon  
 30 Brentano's Aristotelianism and his conception of the history of ideas. Particularly important is the fact that Brentano, in his contrast to Comte, introduces repeated cycles of short periods of scientific progress followed by long periods of decline. Applying this model to Greek philosophy, Brentano argues that it is through Aristotle that philosophy first reaches  
 35 a positive phase of scientific thinking. It is therefore mistaken, as Comte holds, to take Greek philosophy as a whole to belong to the theological and metaphysical phase of human thinking (Brentano 1968c, 131). Furthermore,



Brentano contends that Comte has no explanation for the fact that preeminent modern thinkers, such as Bacon, Descartes, Locke, and Leibniz, were able to combine a scientific approach in philosophy with a theistic worldview. Brentano invites his readers to trust these figures' authority. It is their testimony that must ultimately back up Brentano's own view.

This is how things stand at the end of Brentano's first article on Comte. This was not meant to be the end of the matter, however, since Brentano intended to continue his argument in later articles. At the end of his 1869 essay "Auguste Comte und die positive Philosophie," Brentano indicates the direction that his reasoning will take. It is time to *return* to a positive way of thinking, and to find new ways as to how philosophy might profit from the natural sciences. In particular, Brentano expresses his desire to give a special place to "psychological inquiries and to inquiries of an ordinary metaphysical nature" (Brentano 1968c, 133). In contrast to Comte, then, who neglected these domains, Brentano expects progress precisely from those domains where, as he says, "a fine beginning has already been made." (ibid.) Five years later, Brentano followed up on this remark by publishing the *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (1874).

#### 4. The turn to psychology

The *Psychology* of 1874 proves that Brentano's plan of renewing philosophy was more than a bold pronouncement. It is mostly this work that scholars have in mind when they speak of Brentano as an "ingenious renewer" (Haller 1988) who started "a scientific revolution in philosophy" (Jacquette 2002) that formed part of a more general "intellectual revolution" (Jacquette, 2004, 1). There can be no doubt that, with his *Psychology*, Brentano had a tremendous impact on 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy. Echoing the praise of Husserl, Stegmüller notes that without Brentano "the entire philosophy of phenomenology would be inconceivable" (Stegmüller 1969, 249). Hardly less important is Brentano's influence on analytic philosophy of mind. It starts with an indirect influence on Russell and Moore via the work of G.F Stout (see Schaar 2013), continues with the debates between Chisholm, Sellars, and Quine, in which Brentano's conception of intentionality forms the bone of contention, and culminates in recent projects in philosophy of

mind, like the self-presentational approaches to consciousness, which draw their inspiration from Brentano (see Frechette 2013).

Focusing exclusively on his *Psychology*, none of these studies mentions Brentano's ambition to combine positivist thinking with a theistic world-view. Even studies with a broader perspective that take into account the larger cultural background of Brentano's work are often deficient in this respect (see Ierna, 2014). There is a simple explanation for this deficiency. Clearly, the tacit assumption that underlies these studies has been that after Brentano left the Church, his theism ceased to play a significant role in his intellectual production. The implication seems to be that both Brentano himself and his philosophy became emancipated from their religious background. One source of this popular narrative is Georg Katkov, a student of Oskar Kraus and Christian Ehrenfels in Prague, who did not know Brentano personally, but had first-hand information from the inner circles of Brentano's students. Katkov describes Brentano's intellectual development as a painful struggle during which Brentano "freed himself from the moral and intellectual bondage [of the Catholic Church] under which he had suffered for many years" (Katkov 1978, 12). From this struggle emerged a free-thinker, dedicated to the advance of scientific methods, who "could have only recourse to his rational thinking to buttress his world outlook, which had earlier been provided for him by ecclestial tradition." (ibid.). Did reason prevail over religious belief?<sup>19</sup>

This popular view is not warranted by Katkov's account; for the remarks just quoted do not justify the conclusion that Brentano's turn to psychology entailed turning *away* from religious belief. Katkov himself recognizes this fact later on his portray of Brentano's world view when he notes that even after rejecting the whole body of Christian dogma, "the urge to find and perfect a rational and natural belief in God was for Brentano a moral one" (Katkov 2008, 22). The persistence of this urge speaks against a narrative of personal secularisation, as Richard Schaefer has recently argued. Brentano's departure from priesthood, Schaefer says, was a "departure from religion in the name of a better religion" (see Schaefer 2013, 556). The turn to psychology must be seen as an integral part of this development, just as

<sup>19</sup> For more information on Brentano's "crisis in faith (*Glaubenskrise*)" and some speculations about his refusal to convert to another Christian denomination, see Tiefensee 1998, 53ff. and Schaefer 2007, 478).

Brentano says at the end of his Comte lecture: psychological inquiry and inquiry in metaphysics, including questions of religion, should go hand in hand. Brentano's plan for a renewal of philosophy remained essentially unchanged while he was working on *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*. The plan only became more concrete.

One might object that Brentano deliberately sidesteps questions of metaphysics when he defines psychology, in an empiricist spirit, as the science of mental phenomena, and not as the science of the soul, as Aristotle defined it. But it would be rash to conclude from this that Brentano thereby excluded metaphysical questions from his *Psychology*. In the introduction to the first edition, Brentano tells us that his work will eventually have six parts or "books". Brentano intended for the final book to deal "with the relationship between mind and body" and "pursue the question if it is conceivable that mental life continues after the disintegration of the body." (Brentano 1873, xxvii). Since Brentano never finished the work, one might surmise that he became disaffected with this plan. But this is unlikely, as Robin Rollinger points out, given the lack of textual evidence for such a change of mind. "By no means", Rollinger contends, "did Brentano grow indifferent towards the issues to be treated therein [i.e. the issue of immortality and the existence of God]. Nor did he become sceptical about arriving at the results which he had originally envisioned" (Rollinger 2011, 5). It is true that, during his Vienna period, Brentano set aside the *Psychology* to work on different projects, but this does not count as strong evidence that Brentano lost faith in his original plan.

Indeed, manuscripts in Brentano's *Nachlass* not only confirm that Brentano had a detailed plan for the remaining books of his *Psychology*,<sup>20</sup> but also demonstrate his enduring faith in reaching its metaphysical goals.<sup>21</sup> Kastil used Brentano's notes to reconstruct a proof for the soul's immortality that closely follows the path sketched in the first book of the *Psychology*:<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> See manuscript PS 56, published in Rollinger 2011.

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, Brentano's notes for a lecture course on "Selected Philosophical Questions" (manuscript LS 22) which contain a detailed discussion of the question of immortality.

<sup>22</sup> See Brentano 1954, 187-249.

“But will it be possible for us to find, by means of induction, factual generalizations in the mental realm which will furnish the premises for a deduction which will solve the problem of immortality? [...] By its very nature this investigation is such that it will be best to assign it to the last place in the sequence of psychological discussions. Let us just add, since it is obvious from the outset, that there can be no verification via a direct experience concerning the problem of immortality. Thus, there seems to be a dangerous gap here. Perhaps, however, we can substitute indirect for direct experience, inasmuch as numerous phenomena of experience become more intelligible if we accept the hypothesis of immortality than if we deny it. Similarly, the phenomena of falling bodies gives us only indirect evidence of the rotation of the earth on its axis.” (Brentano 1973, 72f).<sup>23</sup>

In addition to this discussion of immortality, the *Psychology* contains revealing remarks regarding the possibility of proving God’s existence on the basis of psychological evidence. In the chapter concerning the relationship between presentations and judgments, Brentano wonders whether “an eminent thinker, as St. Thomas Aquinas undoubtedly was, really believed that he had demonstrated the infinite perfection of the first cause of the world by means of such a proof” (Brentano 1973, 229). In speaking of the “high flying speculations” of Thomas Aquinas, Brentano seems to question the very idea of proving God’s existence by rational means. But that would misconstrue Brentano’s claim; he merely points out a specific logical mistake with Thomas’s proof, which results from Aquinas’s failure to distinguish clearly between presenting an object as existing and judging it to exist. Brentano’s criticism of this logical point is consistent with the prominent role that Brentano ascribes to psychology for pursuing questions of metaphysics. The following passage from a later manuscript, dated 1911/12, confirms that Brentano did not change his mind on this point:<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> For more on the problem of immortality and its place in Brentano’s *Psychology*, see Kaminska (2014a) and (2014b).

<sup>24</sup> According to Kastil, Brentano eventually arrived at a proof of God’s existence that fully satisfied him (see Brentano 1968b, iv). One of his last manuscripts, dated 1915, presents this proof perspicuously (see Brentano 1968b, 445–489).

“If everything that is good in itself belongs to the domain of consciousness, it is clear that there can be no proof of the existence of God that abstracts from the concept of consciousness, and that what such a proof requires as its real starting point is something that refers back by its nature to some consciousness as its cause.” (Brentano 1968h, 85)

Thus, we see that Brentano did not turn to psychology because he struggled to escape from his theological past. On the contrary, he remained convinced that a psychological foundation was necessary to answer the highest questions of metaphysics — a conviction that lies at the core of Brentano’s philosophical ambitions. Gilbert Ryle came close to recognizing this point in his account of Brentano’s personality as “a mutinous Catholic priest, a devoted Aristotelian scholar, a sound medievalist, and notably Messiah-minded” (Ryle 1976, 15). The substantive question raised by consideration of Brentano’s personality is whether his “missionary” theism interferes with his project of renewing philosophy.

## 5. The double-edged sword

In this final section, I want to present tentative evidence that Brentano’s personal commitment to a theistic worldview conflicts with the ideal of a purely theoretical attitude in philosophy. The evidence is tentative because we do not know whether excerpts from “A letter to the Agnostic,” which Kastil attributes to Brentano, were all penned by Brentano’s own hand (Brentano 1987b).<sup>25</sup> If they were, the letter would corroborate the crucial role that Brentano’s theistic convictions played for his philosophical position. However, it also contains some confessions that cast doubt on the coherence of Brentano’s renewal project and thereby reveal it to be a double-edged sword.

The letter begins in an eminently humble and friendly tone, expressing gratitude to an unidentified addressee for presenting his well-considered reasons for doubting the existence of God. The tone becomes harsher

<sup>25</sup> Kastil does not disclose bibliographical details of this letter, and no manuscript in Brentano’s *Nachlass* or in Kastil’s *Nachlass*, has yet been identified as the text that Kastil conveys. Thanks to Thomas Binder for this information.

when the author, presumably Brentano, accuses the addressee of possessing merely “half knowledge”. Quoting Francis Bacon, the author announces with considerable pathos that “half knowledge leads away from God, while whole knowledge leads to him.” (Brentano 1987b, liv)

5 Let us put this claim in the context of Brentano’s view that philosophy can progress only when it commits itself to a purely theoretical interest. Whenever philosophy was driven by such an interest, as Brentano emphasized in his lectures on the history of philosophy, it made progress in the same way as the empirical sciences. Pursuing a purely theoretical interest, however, also means that philosophy can make a fresh start and leave  
10 behind all prejudices of the past. This is how Brentano conceptualizes his project in descriptive psychology. Like Aristotle and Descartes, he wants to begin anew and rely only on ideas that he finds self-evident. One such idea, taken from Aristotle’s theory of the soul, is worth mentioning explicitly, since it reveals how Brentano attempts to align these different traditions. When the mind engages with reality, Aristotle says, it also comes to know its own functioning *en parergo* (“on the side”). Descriptive psychology builds on this idea: It offers a description of mental phenomena as they appear to the mind when it becomes aware of its own functioning “on the  
15 side”, or in “inner perception”, as Brentano says. This Aristotelian idea, which Brentano revived, remains an important issue both in phenomenology and analytic philosophy of mind, the two traditions that reclaim Brentano as their common ancestor.

Those who set aside Brentano’s theism think that it is inessential for understanding Brentano’s contributions to descriptive psychology. But how  
25 could that be so? As long as one regards his project of renewing philosophy as the unifying principle of Brentano’s philosophy, one cannot completely separate his work in descriptive psychology from his belief that certain facts about consciousness provide the empirical basis needed to prove God’s existence.  
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Let us see what the letter to the agnostic adds to these considerations. The argument starts from the assumption, familiar from Brentano’s other writings, that we can gain knowledge about the first cause of the universe in the same way that we can gain knowledge about anything that affects  
35 our senses. On this assumption, there is no obstacle as to why we should not be able to know that God exists. The question is with what *certainty* we

can know of his existence. The author claims that the level of certainty is extremely high, because:

“the empirical basis we require for the proof of God’s existence is so minimal; though of course, we need to make the most ample and vigorous use of the truths of reason. All those who have been bewildered by the proofs of God’s existence, due to a doubt which arises concerning some putative result of what is now inductive investigation, have not made sufficient use of what reason allows us.” (Brentano 1987b, lvii)

The reference to a strong reliance on reason should give us pause. When Brentano labeled his *Psychology* to be a psychology “from an empirical standpoint”, he associated himself with the empiricist tradition that takes reason to be guided by experience. How does this fit with the request “to use reason in as much a way as possible”? Did Brentano come to think that using descriptive methods and using reason amount to the same thing? And if this was his view, can one justify that claim from a purely theoretical point of view?

Further problems arise when one considers that the author evaluates philosophers according to their religious beliefs: “for my part I do not at all deny that the fact that a thinker is a theist, or not a theist, appears to be of eminent significance in assessing his stature as a philosopher.” (Brentano 1987b, lviii). Taken literally, this means that an atheist or an agnostic cannot be a philosopher in the true sense, a claim that does not sit well with Brentano’s statement against selecting professors on the basis of their religious beliefs (see Brentano 1968g). Does the author of this letter assume that any unprejudiced, clear-minded thinker would see the truth of theism? That is as unlikely as claiming that no one could persistently disagree with a religious belief. We cannot infer from an inability to see the truth of theism that someone does not qualify as a “real” philosopher, hence would not be worth hiring.

Equally striking is the author’s claim that philosophy would be in serious trouble “if the existence of God, and everything connected to this as a consequence, is banned from the domain of philosophical knowledge.” (Brentano 1987b, lix). The claim is particularly strong because the author of the letter insists that by setting the question of God’s existence aside, philosophy would lose its status among the sciences *altogether* [*ganz und gar*]. That is, it would cease to be philosophy in the true sense and become something else – empirical psychology, perhaps. What purely theoretical



reasons would support such a strong claim? The following remark suggests that Brentano relies on reasons that are not purely theoretical:

5 “Investigation that reveals to us a divine cause of the world and thus optimistically illuminates the fate of the world and our own fate, provides in the sublime consciousness of these very truths that which is most enchanting [*beglückend*] of all the world has to offer.” (Brentano 1987b, lix).

10 This confirms the picture of Brentano’s personality that Ryle painted. It also confirms the primary goals of Brentano’s philosophy, as characterized by Franziska Meyer-Hillebrand: “Brentano left the Church with a clear consciousness and with the conviction that he had to devote his intellectual powers to establish a rational theism.” (Brentano 1954, vi).<sup>26</sup> Taking the letter as evidence for this interpretation, we may conclude that in 1909 Brentano upholds the protest that he expressed in his first *Habilitation* thesis: 15 nothing can force us to choose between philosophy being speculative and philosophy being exact and scientific.

But the question remains as to what justifies this conviction. Does it have a rational basis, as Brentano suggests? Like Schaefer, I believe that 20 we also have to take into account Brentano’s emotional engagement “with his deeply felt desire to promote the belief in God.” (Schaefer 2013, 555). There is no further reason that one can appeal to in order to justify this desire. If one tries to do so, one “mutes the emotional connection Brentano had to religion in favour of a one-sidedly rationalist account of his desire 25 to articulate a concept of religion.” (ibid.). While in itself there is nothing objectionable about giving emotions a role to play in philosophical inquiry, it becomes difficult to hold on to the view that the highest questions of metaphysics are purely theoretical questions.

The danger is that one loses an all-important distinction; namely, the 30 distinction between asking a question and asking for a particular answer to

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26 Following the same line, Reinhard Kamitz writes in an overview of Brentano’s philosophy: “Brentano erblickte das höchste Ziel seiner philosophischen Arbeit darin, deutlich zu machen, dass der Weltverlauf und das menschliche Leben nicht Teil eines sinnlosen, von blindem Zufall beherrschten Geschehens sind, sondern dass es einen vollkommenen Verstand (“Gott”) gibt, der die Elemente der Wirklichkeit aus nichts hervorgebracht und eine alles Sein und Werden durchdringende Ordnung geschaffen hat.” (Kamitz 1983, 161).

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it. No atheist or agnostic should have a problem with a metaphysics that also addresses questions of religion. To this extent, but only to this extent, scientific methods might be helpful in answering such questions. But Brentano clearly expects more from philosophy at this point. He thinks of philosophy as a bridge between scientific thinking and religious belief that serves a particular purpose, namely to apply scientific methods and evidence in proving the existence of God. It is this expectation that is hard to justify, even for a theist. What entitles him to expect that such a proof will be possible, if science and metaphysics are sufficiently advanced? If one makes this simply part of one's belief in God, one no longer seeks a rational foundation for that belief.<sup>27</sup>

If such expectations are therefore unwarranted on purely rational grounds, this also raises a worry concerning Brentano's conception of renewing philosophy. Brentano never seems to seriously consider the possibility that science does not support belief in God. He simply assumes with reference to Bacon, as mentioned earlier, that "full knowledge leads to God." (see Brentano 1987b, liv). Making such bold assumptions is dangerous, in light of Brentano's theory that periods of progress should be marked by purely theoretical interests. Although Brentano's descriptive psychology observes this principle, he admits that another interest comes into play with respect to the highest questions of metaphysics: the interest to be redeemed and enjoy the divine nature of the world. Yet if one mixes theoretical interests with personal concerns, one must face the consequences. On Brentano's own view, these consequences are dramatic and unacceptable. When practical interests are not satisfied, scepticism follows; and scepticism will be followed by dogmatism or mysticism. Brentano's conception of the renewal of philosophy was meant to prevent such a decline. Since it also was meant to serve the goals of theism, however, it becomes a dangerous sword.

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Johannes L. Brandl  
Fachbereich Philosophie (KGW)  
Universität Salzburg  
Franziskanergasse 1  
A-5020 Salzburg  
johannes.brandl@sbg.ac.at

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