

Is Brentano's Metaphilosophy Coherent?
The First and Fourth Habilitation Theses Reconsidered

1. A metaphilosophical position should contain answers to three questions:

- Q1 What are the goals of philosophy?
- Q2 How can philosophy achieve these goals?
- Q3 How does philosophy relate to other disciplines? (theology, science, the arts etc.)

Brentano rarely addresses these questions *explicitly*, but often *implicitly*, e.g. in his lectures on Schelling (1866 and 1889), on Comte (1869), on “A Loss of confidence” (1874), “The Future of Philosophy” (1893) and “The Four Phases of Philosophy” (1895”).

2. These lectures elaborate the first four habilitation theses:

- H1 Philosophy must deny that the sciences can be divided into speculative and exact; if this is not rightly denied, philosophy would have no right to its own existence.
- H2 Philosophy must reject both those who want to draw its principles from theology and also those who hold that philosophy would be useless if there were no supernatural revelation.
- H3 Nevertheless, it is true that established doctrines of theology would be like guiding stars to philosophers.
- H4 The true method of philosophy is none other than that of the science of nature.

3. Two strands in Brentano's metaphilosophy:

A conservative line of thought:

Aristotle was the first scientific philosopher (scientist and philosopher) who laid the foundations on which all progress in science and philosophy depends.

A progressive line of thought:

The history of science (including philosophy) follows a certain pattern which shows why and when a discipline begins to flourish. Only when psychology becomes a mature science will the golden age of philosophy come.

4. Working hypotheses to be discussed in the Q&A:

- There is as tension between the conservative and the progressive line of thought.
- Since Brentano does not explicitly address this tension, it is unclear how he tried to resolve it.
- Brentano's metaphilosophy contains a nucleus that remained constant throughout.
- Tensions in his view can be explained as resulting from considerations lying outside the nucleus.

5. For ease of discussion, we may restate the core claims of the habilitation theses as follows:

H1* Philosophy can be speculative without therefore being a less exact science.

H2* Philosophy is autonomous with respect to theology.

H3* Philosophy may receive guidance from theology.

H4* Philosophy and natural science share a common method.

6. Answers to question Q1 – Q3:

From H1 we can extract an answer to question Q1:*

The goal of philosophy is the same as the goal of science in general: knowledge that is as exact as possible.

From H2 and H3* we can extract an answer to Q3:*

The relation between philosophy and theology is (or should be) the same as between philosophy and the natural sciences.

H4 provides an answer to Q2. Which answer?*

7. Possible implications of H4*

I1 Philosophy can only be exact when it adapts the methods of the natural sciences to its own purposes. (A claim inspired by Aristotle, contested by those who separate philosophy and science).

I2 Philosophy can be as exact as mathematics despite being based on experience. (A claim inspired by Comte, contested by advocates of Kant's synthetic apriori).

These implications explain the divergent interpretations of H4 in the literature: See Gilson 1966, Benetka 1999, Sauer 2000, Huemer 2018, Kaiser-El-Safti 2019, Frechette 2020, Münch unpubl.

8. Both implications are problematic:

Contra I1: Why follow the lead of the *natural* sciences. The exactness of science in a broad sense (including the social sciences and humanities) may be good enough for philosophy.

Contra I2: Why follow the lead of mathematics and risk the objection that philosophy aspires for the impossible. Exactness does not presuppose a sharp analytic/synthetic distinction.

9. A new proposal

- Remove H4 from the nucleus of Brentano's metaphilosophy.
- Consider I1 as an additional claim of the early (more conservative) Brentano, and I2 as an additional claim of the later (more progressive) Brentano.
- The coherence of *the nucleus* of Brentano's metaphilosophy hangs on the coherence of H1.
- What is the basis of the claim that science can be both speculative and exact? The example of mechanics? Should philosophy follow this model?