

Dispositional higher-order acts. A Brentanian account

What makes my seeing of a red patch a *conscious* act? Is it a second-order act or is it a build-in feature of all mental acts? Regarding the first question, we might ask further: is the second-order act itself conscious? Or are these acts unconscious acts? Higher-Order-Theories of perception and thought (HOT-theories) usually answer the first question affirmatively. In order to avoid the infinite regress of second-, third-, etc. order of conscious-making acts, they usually argue that second-order acts are not conscious. Franz Brentano's theory is generally seen as an interesting alternative to HOT-theories with (unconscious) higher-order acts, since it gives an account of inner consciousness in terms of conscious-making acts without acknowledging the existence of unconscious acts. But does he really avoid the infinite regress? His solution lies in the thesis that inner consciousness accompanies every mental phenomenon, although both are conceptually distinguishable:

The presentation of the sound and the presentation of the presentation of the sound form a single mental phenomenon; it is only by considering it in its relation to two different objects, one of which is a physical phenomenon and the other a mental phenomenon, that we divide it conceptually into two presentations...We can say that the sound is the primary object of the act of hearing, and that the act of hearing itself is the secondary object. Temporally they both occur at the same time, but in the nature of the case, the sound is prior. A presentation of the sound without a presentation of the act of hearing would not be inconceivable, at least a priori, but a presentation of the act of hearing without a presentation of the sound would be an obvious contradiction¹.

In other words, inner consciousness and the mental act are considered distinct only from the perspective of the objects they are directed upon, but they form one single mental phenomenon. Inner consciousness is therefore not really a second-order act, it simply has a different direction than the act it makes conscious. On the one hand, Brentano seems to argue for an identity theory of the mental act and the consciousness of this mental act, but on the other hand this identity is merely psychological (they are perceived as fused into a unity), and not ontological. As a result, Brentano argues against HOT-theories based on unconscious second-order thoughts. Instead of providing a same-order theory of consciousness, his solution to the regress makes him argue only for a HOT-theory with conscious self-directed second-order thoughts. But such a theory doesn't fit well with some of his other thesis on consciousness. According to Brentano, every mental act A is presented 'on the side' and accepted with evidence (T1). Considering another thesis defended by Brentano, namely that every judgment presupposes a presentation (T2), (T1) is nothing but unproblematic: for to judge 'Socrates is ill' (P1), one must represent the ill Socrates. But if every mental act is accepted through inner perception, then the presentation of the ill Socrates is possible only if there is a judgment 'on the side' of the presentation of the ill Socrates, say (P2). But then, (P2) should be based on a presentation which presupposes a third judgment (P3), etc. In other words, Brentano's conception of perception as judicative – perception is the acceptance or rejection of the existence of the represented object – makes it quite natural to interpret his theory of inner consciousness as a HOT-theory, but his solution to the regress, since it discards unconscious consciousness, implies that his theory is a same-order theory of consciousness. In order to make sense of his theory, I think we have to choose between one of the two alternatives: either by allowing for some form of unconscious consciousness or by showing

¹ Brentano (1995), 98.

that his theory is really an identity theory of consciousness and mental acts despite some of the HOT features it has.

My choice goes for the first alternative, but following a *dispositional* understanding of the adjective ‘unconscious’. It is well known that Brentano rejects unconscious mental states, but it is rarely mentioned that he accepts unconscious non-occurring mental states. These are dispositions to mental states, which are the traces left by past mental states. Brentano’s conception of the character of a person is for instance based on dispositions to act such and such. Mary’s excentricity is a disposition she has to particular mental states, a disposition that acts as the cause of certain mental states and the effect of other mental states. Brentano’s conception of aesthetics relies much on this idea of dispositions: what characterizes great artists is their capacity or dispositions to more vivid presentations. These traces of past presentations are memories of past presentations or associations of ideas².

This understanding of dispositions and its adaptation in the framework of Brentano’s theory of inner consciousness would lead to a higher-order theory where for an intentional act A to be conscious it is necessary for A (among other things) to be triggered by a disposition to A. I will propose some support for this kind of theory.

² See for instance F. Brentano, “Das Genie” [1892], reprinted in Brentano, *Sämtliche Schriften Band 3: Schriften zur Ethik und Ästhetik*, Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2010, 99-128; Brentano, *Grundzüge der Ästhetik*, Bern: Francke, 1959, p. 54f.; see also Brentano (1995), p.45.