

Was Brentano a Systematic Philosopher?

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, work in philosophy has become increasingly fragmented and specialized, more and more philosophical disciplines and sub-disciplines have been emerging, with the effect that experts of one sub-discipline often have difficulties in obtaining an overview of the developments in the others. In reaction to this tendency, one might be tempted to glorify the old ideal of the polymath, the universal genius who could, all by herself, address *all* philosophical problems and provide a solution that emerged from a unified, yet comprehensive system.

In a series of recent contributions, Uriah Kriegel has argued that Franz Brentano's philosophical position did or was intended to constitute a unified system in this sense. In fact, Kriegel suggests, Brentano is the last philosopher who was able to perform this task: his "may well be the last grand system of Western philosophy" (Kriegel, 2017, p. 29). Kriegel's contention is based on the view that Brentano's "primary goal was to fashion as stable and as unified a framework for a total theory of the world as he could" with the goal to develop "a *grand system* in the classical sense of a unified account of the true, the good, and the beautiful" (Kriegel, 2018, p. 7).

This evaluation comes as a surprise to many Brentano scholars, who have taken for granted that Brentano's hostility against German system-philosophy and his empiricist and positivist approach have made him immune to the temptation of trying to erect a system of his own. For sure, Brentano approached philosophical problems in a very systematic manner. He conducted a series of detailed analyses, yet managed not to get lost in the details and to always keep an eye on how specific results would fit into a "bigger picture". In the following, I will discuss whether this qualifies Brentano's philosophical position as a "grand system" from which one could deduce a profound and informative answer to any serious philosophical

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problem.¹ I will pay particular attention to two aspects: Brentano's view that philosophy should be done in a rigorous, scientific manner and the fragmentary character of Brentano's work. I will argue that both aspects stand in contrast to the very idea of system-philosophy: the maxim that philosophy should adopt the method of the natural sciences was intended by Brentano as a way of distancing himself from system-philosophy; while the fragmentary character of Brentano's work does not fulfill the aspiration of system-philosophy to provide an answer to everything. Yet, the incompleteness of his work is not an arbitrary or contingent aspect; it is rather a necessary side-effect of his methodological views.

2. Brentano's Self-positioning in the History of Philosophy

In the fall of 1894 Brentano gave a lecture entitled *The Four Phases of Philosophy and its Current State*,² where he presented a psychologistic scheme that was based on "considerations of cultural psychology" (Brentano, 1998, p. 85) and aimed at explaining the dynamics of the history of philosophy and motivating his optimistic outlook regarding its future development. Following a model he had adopted from Comte,³ Brentano distinguished three periods in the history of philosophy – ancient, medieval, and modern philosophy – and suggested that each of these periods had evolved in a cycle of four phases. The first was a phase of ascending development, while the other three were characterized as phases of decline. Brentano considered Plato and Aristotle to be philosophers of the first phase of the first period,

¹ The modification "profound and informative" seems necessary, or else Wittgenstein's early position would qualify as a philosophical system, as the picture theory of the *Tractatus* provides a unified account of the true, the good, and the beautiful, which, however, is not (and does even not intend to be) very profound or informative, at least not with regard to the latter two concepts, as it merely consists in the thesis that statements in ethics and aesthetics are meaningless.

² The lecture was given on November 28, 1894 at the *Literarische Gesellschaft in Wien*; a printed version appeared in the subsequent year as a self-standing publication. In the foreword to the latter, Brentano states that the scheme he develops "has been presupposed by me, as by students of my academic lectures on the history of philosophy, for more than twenty years" (Brentano, 1998, p. 81), which suggest that he had developed it already before coming to Vienna in 1874. In fact, Carl Stumpf recalls that Brentano had already used it in his lectures in the mid-sixties of the nineteenth century and that he had told him to have originated it as early as Easter (i.e., early April) 1860 (cf. Stumpf, 1976, p. 11), which shows that Brentano held on to this scheme over several decades.

³ In the introduction to the printed edition of the 1894 lecture Brentano presents his model as an original contribution of his own; he states: "The novelty of the conception of the history of philosophy which it contains might surprise some of my hearers" (Brentano, 1998, p. 81). In other places, however, he draws direct analogies to Comte's theory of three stages of development of the sciences. For a detailed discussion of the relations between Brentano's and Comte's theories, cf. Tănăsescu, 2017.

Augustine and Thomas Aquinas inaugurated the second period, whereas Bacon, Descartes, Locke and Leibniz marked the beginning of the third period which, he suggested, had come to a conclusion in its third and last phase of decline that was dominated by philosophers like Schelling and Hegel.

As Brentano definitely did not intend to proclaim the end of philosophy, the very structure of his scheme was clearly set up to invite the reader to extend it into the future and ponder what the next, upcoming period of philosophical research will be like and who the protagonists of its first phase of ascending development might be. In fact, Brentano explicitly expressed his hope that the coming of a new period is imminent. In the text, he stated: “we have quite generally good grounds [...] for believing that our own age is the beginning of a new period of development” (Brentano, 1998, p. 102) and some pages later he suggested that this task would be computed “by us or by our successors” (Brentano, 1998, p. 111). In short, it seems obvious to me that these passages and the overall structure of the text indicate that Brentano *did* want to invite the readers to at least consider the possibility that he himself could be one of the thinkers who will be able to give the decisive impulse for a new, ascending phase that inaugurated a new period in the history of philosophy.⁴

This raises the question for the characteristics that qualify a philosopher to become the proponent of a new period in philosophy. Brentano characterized the first, ascending phase of each period in a twofold way: first of all, we find “a lively and pure theoretical interest” (Brentano, 1998, p. 85) that allowed its protagonists to draw their attention to phenomena that up to that moment had been hardly considered or even overlooked. Secondly, it is

marked by a method that is essentially appropriate to nature (even if in its early forms it is still rather primitive). It was through the aid of this method that science developed, partly through perfecting hypotheses, partly by an enlargement of the scope of investigation and partly through confronting new questions. (Brentano, 1998, p. 86)

The impression that Brentano liked to think of himself as the protagonist of the first, ascending phase of a new, upcoming period can be further substantiated with the following three facts: first, he distanced himself vehemently from the tradition that is nowadays sometimes referred to as “classical German philosophy”, the tradition of German Idealism beginning with Kant and leading up to Schelling and Hegel, which had dominated the

⁴ In fact, in the text that accompanies the English translation of Brentano’s Lecture, Balázs Mezei and Barry Smith accepted this invitation and argued explicitly that Brentano was “as representing the first, ascending phase in the current cycle of philosophical development” (Mezei & Smith, 1998, p. 42).

philosophical scene in Germany in the first half and the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century, but had already begun to lose influence when Brentano started out his career. In this way, he emphasized the idea that there is a discontinuity between the philosophers that stood for the last phases of the third period of philosophy and his own philosophical work. Second, Brentano demonstrated his curiosity, his *lively and theoretical interest*, by focusing on an emerging scientific discipline, psychology, which enabled him to find new and original ways of analysing mental phenomena.

Thirdly, the idea that Brentano made an effort to leave tradition behind and introduce a new way of addressing philosophical problems is particularly manifest in his comments on philosophical method. From his early days on, Brentano made a major effort to develop a new method for philosophical research that takes up elements from positivism and empiricism. Brentano was well aware that a move of this kind could mark the beginning of a new chapter in the history of philosophy. Already in his *Habilitation*-lecture in 1866 he had expressed his understanding that “[t]he great turning points in the developments of a science indisputably come along with a change of method” (Brentano, 1929, p. 108).⁵ Moreover, the development of a new method can (and probably was intended to) have an interesting side effect. Philosophers, who succeed in establishing a new method, elevate their own contribution from the level of individual achievement and open it up to a collective enterprise that can incorporate the contributions of others, who adopt this method. Moreover, the more the method “catches on”, the more it is likely that it will become the unifying moment of a new school or movement that can ideally come to characterise the phase of ascending development.⁶

⁵ My translation: “Zu den größten Wendepunkten in der Entwicklung einer Wissenschaft gehört unstreitig ein Wechsel der Methode.”

⁶ In this last point, it seems to me, Brentano was not particularly successful, even though the situation is complex. On the one hand, Brentano’s place in the history of philosophy is often illustrated with a reference to the “School of Franz Brentano” and the long list of impressive students that have been influenced by Brentano. Moreover, there are indications that Brentano supported his students in their search for academic positions in different parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; so we cannot be sure whether he was completely faithful when he told Stumpf that “he was, on principle and with every right, against the development of a ‘school’ that swears by his every word” (Stumpf, 1976, p. 44). But there are also elements that might make us hesitant of speaking of a “school” in the narrow sense of the term. Brentano was not, strictly speaking, the academic teacher of most of the members of the so-called Brentano school: many of them heard some of Brentano’s lectures by accident, some of them, such as Stumpf or Husserl, report that this experience was the decisive motive to dedicate themselves to philosophy, but then went on to study with other philosophers (cf. Werle, 1989, p. 26). Moreover, Brentano’s relationship to many of his former students, especially the ones who had become famous in their own right, was not exactly harmonious, which might have discouraged them from acknowledging the influence of Brentano on their own thought. I doubt that Husserl, Meinong, or Höfler would have thought of themselves as members of a “Brentano school”. I discuss the relation

The first and the third points are related: Brentano distances himself from the established tradition of German system-philosophy not only by explicit critique, but also by contrasting it with a new and completely different method – which he summarized with his maxim that philosophy ought to be done in a rigorous, scientific manner. In particular, some 23 years after his *Habilitation*, Brentano explicitly states that his fourth *Habilitations*-thesis – “*The true method of philosophy is none other than that of the natural sciences*” (Brentano, 1929, pp. 136f.)⁷ – was meant as a critique of mainstream philosophy at the time – and mentions Schelling and Hegel as representatives of this view.⁸ Moreover, Brentano recalls that the examiners of his *Habilitation* were students of Schelling – he explicitly recalls the names of Franz Hoffmann and Maier⁹ – about whom he comments with the words: “my judges were at the same time the adverse party” (Brentano, 1929, p. 106)¹⁰ and adds that they made the fourth *Habilitations*-thesis the primary target of their attack.

All these points illustrate how central Brentano’s attempt to develop a new philosophical method was for his self-understanding of contributing to the beginning of a new and original position that leaves the speculative approaches of “system-philosophy” behind and might mark the beginning of a new period in the history of philosophy. Moreover, Brentano was good in communicating this self-understanding to his audience. His insistence that philosophy should be done with a rigorous, scientific method was one of the main motives for his success among students and young scholars – but also beyond. Carl Stumpf, for example, mentions in his autobiographical *Selbstdarstellung* that Brentano’s *Habilitations*-defence – in which, as we have seen, the fourth thesis played a central role –

of Brentano to members of the Brentano school also in (Huemer, 2004), for more detailed discussions of the unity in the Brentano school (cf. Albertazzi, Libardi, & Poli, 1996; Dewalque, 2017a, 2017b).

⁷ My translation. Brentano formulated his *Habilitations*-theses in Latin (*Vera philosophiae methodus nulla alia nisi scientiae naturalis est.*) and in German (*Die wahre Methode der Philosophie ist keine andere als die der Naturwissenschaften.*)

⁸ He makes this point in December 17, 1889, at a lecture he gave at *Philosophische Gesellschaft* in Vienna. At the occasion, he presented for a second time a minimally revised version of his *Habilitations*-lecture *Über Schellings Philosophie*. In the introduction to this lecture, he recalls the circumstances of his *Habilitation*.

⁹ While Brentano refers to Hofmann with first and family name, he omits Maier’s first name and speaks of “Maier, the father of the economist [*Maier, der Vater des Nationalökonom*en]” (1929, p. 106). He probably refers to Alois Mayr (the only Maier listed in the course guide [*Vorlesungsverzeichnis*] of the University of Würzburg by this or any similar spelling), a mathematician and philosopher at the University of Würzburg, who was present at Brentano’s *Habilitation*-defence and whose son, Georg Mayr, was economist [*Nationalökonom*]. The name Maier is very common in German speaking countries and there are many variations of the spelling, which could explain Brentano’s mis-spelling. For a more detailed discussion on the *Habilitations*-defence and Brentano’s difficulties with the Schellingians at the University of Würzburg, cf. (Huemer 2019).

¹⁰ My translation: *meine Richter waren zugleich die mir feindliche Partei.*

was the moment that convinced him to pursue studies in philosophy (cf. Stumpf, 1924, p. 4) and in his “Reminiscences of Franz Brentano” he notes:

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

We have similar testimony not only from Brentano’s early students, but also from those who attended Brentano’s lecture much later in his career. Edmund Husserl, for example, who studied with Brentano from 1884-86, suggests that

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

These two testimonies are exemplary for a series of similar statements by students he taught in different periods in his life,¹¹ which shows not only that Brentano’s methodological approach to philosophy was perceived as something new and original and so guaranteed success among young, talented students; it also shows that Brentano continued to discuss his respective views in a prominent manner throughout his life. Moreover, the impact of Brentano’s maxim went beyond the smaller circle of his direct students. Even in the manifesto of the Vienna Circle, for example, Brentano is mentioned as one of thinkers who had contributed to create a climate in Vienna that had made logical empiricism possible.¹²

3. Philosophy and the natural sciences

¹¹ The most convincing testimony is probably Alois Höfler’s very bitter and critical obituary of Franz Brentano, where one of the few positive things mentioned is that Brentano taught students to apply the rigorous standards known from mathematics and physics also to philosophy (Höfler, 1917, p. 321).

¹² Cf. Neurath, Hahn, & Carnap, 1973. It seems that not all members of the Circle agreed with this assessment of Brentano. In a review of the book *Franz Brentano. Zur Kenntnis seines Lebens und seiner Lehre* (edited by Oskar Kraus), Moritz Schlick, for example, takes a distance. He praises Brentano for his fourth *Habilitations*-thesis but suggests that “[...] a scientific[ally oriented] thinker will have to reject in great parts the content of his [i.e., Brentano’s] philosophy, it is hardly in line with this thesis” (Schlick, 1919, p. 99). (My translation: [...] *das Inhaltliche seiner Philosophie wird der naturwissenschaftlich Denkende freilich zum großen Teil ablehnen müssen, es steht mit der Forderung jener These zu wenig im Einklang.*)

In the preceding section we have seen that Brentano's maxim that philosophy should be done with a rigorous, scientific method was essential for his self-understanding, but also for his success among students and beyond. Moreover, Brentano's conception can also be regarded a unifying moment of the Brentano school (cf. Dewalque, 2017b) and thus as a moment that had the potential to secure and spread the impact of Brentano's philosophy on a larger scale.

When Brentano suggests that philosophy should adopt the rigorous method of the natural sciences, he does not argue a form of naturalism as we know it from the late twentieth century, however; his thesis is best described as postulating a *continuity* of method between philosophy and the natural sciences. According to Brentano, every scientific discipline, including philosophy, is called to develop a method that is best suited to the phenomena it studies. Brentano thus does not suggest that the philosophical method is to be replaced by or reduced to the method of physics, nor does he argue that philosophy should make use of the language of mathematics to present its results.¹³

It is, for Brentano, a cornerstone of the scientific method that it starts from experience – but the kind of experience that is relevant might vary drastically from one scientific discipline to another – and that applies rigor in the description of the phenomena, the formulation of the hypotheses, and the conduction of inductive generalizations and deductive inferences. Thus, while Brentano does insist in the centrality of the three steps – observation, description, induction – he also acknowledges the variety of ways in which these three steps can be realized. With respect to the study of mental phenomena, he even argues that it takes a very special form – and warns explicitly against naturalist line of reasoning which he considered fallacious:

It is in this context a very common mistake to confuse research in analogy to the study of nature [*Naturforschung*] with research that consists in the study of the same class of phenomena as the study of nature; just like, for example, some are so foolish to base themselves psychologically only on experiences of seeing, hearing, feeling, but not on experiences of the so-called inner perception, like judging, preferring. (Brentano 1929, 79)¹⁴

¹³ I argue this point in more detail in Huemer, 2018.

¹⁴ My translation: *Ein hierhergehöriger, besonders häufiger Fehler ist es, wenn einer die Forschung nach Analogie der Naturforschung mit einer Forschung verwechselt, welche auf dem Studium derselben Klasse von Phänomenen beruhe, wie die Erforschung der Natur; wie denn z. B. manche so töricht sind, nur auf Erscheinungen des Sehens, Hörens, Tastens, nicht aber auf Erscheinungen der sog. Inneren Wahrnehmung, wie Urteilen, Vorziehen, psychologisch sich stützen zu wollen.*

This clearly shows that the way psychologists conduct research takes different forms and involves different means from those of the research conducted by physicists, meteorologists, or mathematicians. It does not show, however, that philosophy or psychology would play a privileged role in the system of the sciences. The method of the natural sciences is spelled out in one way in philosophy (or psychology) and in another way in physics or chemistry. Brentano, thus, acknowledges the differences between scientific disciplines but does admit, at the same time, that lines between them might not be clear-cut¹⁵ and that they can benefit from each another: “there is no pair of sciences between which there are no reciprocal services” (Brentano, 1995a, p. 8).

Brentano’s view of science was thus pluralistic to a certain extent; he attributed a specific task and way of procedure to each discipline without even considering the possibility that one discipline might be reduced to another, more basic one. For this reason I am quite sceptical concerning Kriegel’s claim that Brentano’s “primary goal was to fashion as stable and as unified a framework for a total theory of the world as he could” – with the end to “produce a unified theory of everything” (Kriegel, 2018, p. 7). I would rather think it is more adequate to suggest that Brentano had strong guiding intuitions that determined his own philosophical views and directed him in different areas of research in philosophy or psychology. The idea that a comprehensive philosophical system could provide universal solutions to all kinds of problems that could be raised in the various scientific disciplines was alien to him. Moreover, the idea that philosophy would play a privileged role or that its genuine task was to clear the ground for the natural sciences – in other words, the very idea of a *First Philosophy* – is in direct contrast to his methodological maxim.

4. Brentano’s reluctance to publish

In order to address the question of whether Brentano’s philosophy can be considered a *philosophical system* in the loaded sense the term has acquired in nineteenth century German philosophy, it can be useful to make a short excursus on a very practical and “down-to-earth” topic: Brentano’s notorious reluctance to publish. His students often explicitly discussed this point and typically excused it with Brentano’s curiosity, his energy in addressing ever new

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

problems, and his missing patience to re-elaborate the results of his research and present them in form of a publishable manuscript (cf., for example, Mayer-Hillebrand, 1963, pp. 146f.; Bergman, 1965, p. 94). Alfred Kastil, for example, writes on the first page of his early monograph on Brentano:

Never tempted to come forth with genial ideas in a rash manner, he let everything patiently fully mature in a state of always vigilant self-critique, sometimes for decades. “Who hurries, does not move on the soil of science” he used to calm those who hurried him. Moreover, the penetration of hitherto unexplored domains of truth was more important to him than the literary exploitation of what had already been secured, so that often it needed the soft pressure of external occasions for him to convince him to decide to publish. (Kastil, 1951, p. 7)¹⁶

Throughout his career, Brentano could not live up – at least not in terms of quantity – to his own expectations, nor to that of others concerning his literary output. While in his later career it was his students and followers, who encouraged him to present a systematic outline of his position, early in his career the small number of publications was a topic among the faculty members of the University of Würzburg, who had to decide on whether or not Brentano was to make a career in philosophy in the first place. In 1870 Brentano applied for a promotion from *Privatdozent* (an unpaid teaching position) to *außerordentlicher Professor*. Brentano’s application was discussed controversially. Several professors documented their views and arguments in *Separatvoten*.¹⁷ In most of these documents, both by supporters and by opponents of Brentano, the small number of publications was mentioned explicitly. While the supporters did so merely to underline that the great success of Brentano’s lectures, the breadth of topics he covered in his courses, and his enormous popularity among students by far

¹⁶ My translation: *Nie versucht, übereilt mit genialen Einfällen hervorzutreten, ließ er bei stets wacher Selbstkritik alles geduldig ausreifen, zuweilen Jahrzehnte lang. ‘Wer eilt, bewegt sich nicht auf dem Boden der Wissenschaft’, pflege er die Dränger zu beschwichtigen. Auch war ihm das Vordringen in noch uneroberte Bezirke der Wahrheit wichtiger als die literarische Verwertung des schon Gesicherten, so daß es oft erst eines sanften Zwanges äußerer Anlässe bedurfte, ihm den Entschluß zu publizieren abzurufen.*

¹⁷ A *Separatvotum* allows members of an academic committee to document their deviation from the majority decision. In a faculty meeting on July 29, 1870 Brentano’s promotion was discussed and welcomed, but a final decision was postponed. In a later faculty meeting, which took place on December 3 of the same year, however, the promotion was voted down. This latter decision caused several department members to voice their disagreements in *Separatvoten*. Five faculty members documented their support of Brentano’s application, one faculty member, the full professor Franz Hoffmann – a direct student of Schelling and thus one of the targets of Brentano’s critique in his *Habilitations*-defense some four years earlier – made the unusual move to submit a *Separatvotum* that outlines in detail his motivations for *consenting* to the decision of the second faculty meeting. Brentano’s application and the *Separatvoten* are reprinted in Freudenberger (1969, pp. 454–469). Brentano became *außerordentlicher Professor* on May 13, 1872.

outweighed this small shortcoming, his opponents used it to underline their view that Brentano was not up for the position.

The most striking trace of Brentano's reluctance to publish can be found in his master project, the *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*. On the title page of the first edition from 1874, the book was presented as the first of two volumes. In the foreword (which is reprinted in later editions) Brentano explained that the present volume contained the first two books, while the second volume was supposed to contain the other four books of the work. Brentano obviously wanted to communicate that he had very concrete ideas concerning structure and contents of the second volume and the four books it was supposed to contain. He characterized them with the following words:

A third book, to follow, will investigate the characteristics of, and the laws governing, presentations; the fourth will concern itself with the characteristics and laws of judgements; and the fifth with those of the emotions and, in particular, of acts of will. The final book will deal with the relationship between mind and body, and there we shall also pursue the question of whether it is conceivable that mental life continues after the disintegration of the body. (Brentano, 1995b, p. xxvii)

However, the book remained a fragment; a second volume was never published – at least not in the form outlined in 1874.¹⁸ We can only speculate on the reasons for this shortcoming. It might be due to the circumstances of Brentano's private life. In the year *Psychology* was published, he moved to Vienna and had to acclimatize in a new city. Moreover, in this period he started to overcome his “self-imposed dogma” that a “philosopher whose whole thought, feeling and will is directed toward this task must forego even the thought of marriage” (Stumpf, 1976, p. 26), a process, which might have caused inner tensions. They might have been related simply to his work-load as a full professor at the University of Vienna, maybe in combination with his documented lack of enthusiasm for writing books. But they might also have resulted from more serious concerns: Brentano might just not have been able to hammer out the details of the project about which he had so far only reflected on an abstract level and in quite general terms; he might have encompassed difficulties and encountered critique that have made pursuing the original project impossible or undesirable.

¹⁸ Brentano did publish a second volume of *Psychology* 37 years later, in 1911, but this text is clearly not an elaboration of the project announced in the foreword to the first volume. On the contrary, in the foreword from 1911 he calls the *Psychology of an Empirical Standpoint* a “fragment” (incidentally, the term “fragment” gets lost in the English translation. In the German original he speaks of [...] *meine Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt, die ein Fragment geblieben ist* [...], which is translated as „[...] in spite of its incompleteness, my *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* [...]” [Brentano, 1995b, p. xxv]).

It seems to me that this last explanation is the most probable of the three. I share Josef Werle's suggestion that Brentano would likely have overcome personal difficulties and aversities to work out a publishable manuscript if he had been convinced of having found a definitive and satisfying solution to the problems he had encountered (cf. Werle, 1989, p. 46). Contrary to Kriegel, who argues that "Brentano was not a systematic writer, but he was very much a systematic *thinker*" (Kriegel, 2017, p. 21), I want to suggest that Brentano's reluctance to publish is likely related to theoretical problems he had encountered when he was trying to pursue the path sketched in the introduction to the first volume of the *Psychology*. This seems noteworthy, as the second volume should have further elaborated the three-partition of mental phenomena (with a book on presentations, one on judgments, and one on emotions), which, according to Uriah's Kriegel's recent interpretation, is the core element of Brentano's philosophical "system".

To fully appreciate the point it is important to note that Brentano did not start from abstract principles, from which an entire philosophical system could be deduced in a quasi-automatic manner. His "bigger picture" consisted merely in a handful of guiding intuitions concerning the nature of mental phenomena that were to be subject of continuous confirmation or revision as empirical work on the theory made progress.¹⁹ When Kriegel suggests that Brentano "had a set of core convictions on which he never seriously changed his mind" (Kriegel, 2018, p. 12), he downplays the fact that Brentano was ready to continuously modify his "bigger picture"; this was part of his empiricist *bottom-up* approach, which stands in stark contrast to that of system-philosophies. Kriegel acknowledges that Brentano's was a bottom-up approach (cf. Kriegel, 2018, p. 284), but does not seem to see the tension between Brentano's empiricist approach and system-philosophy:

As a committed empiricist, Brentano had no truck with Hegel-style systems that proceed from the top down, imposing theory on the phenomena. Rather, he believed in evidence-driven theorization progressing through a series of local studies – but all the while having in sight their ultimate integration into a cohesive, total system. (Kriegel, 2018, p. 7)

It seems to me that this merely shows that Brentano cared for coherence of his position and did not regard any part of the theory privileged over the rest. It does not show, however, that his was a philosophical "system" – and it does not, in particular, show that his was the "last

¹⁹ An example of the dynamic character of Brentano's position might be the changes in his views concerning time-consciousness, which often run parallel to changes in his "bigger picture". For a more detailed discussion, cf. Huemer, 2002.

grand system”, for many philosophers after Brentano have cared for the coherence of their own position.

5. Brentano’s missing aesthetics and the possibility of a system as a “collective effort”

Kriegel’s interpretation is based on the idea that Brentano had a “systematic, unified approach to the true, the good, and the beautiful”, which is based on the idea that “we understand the true, the good and the beautiful when we gain a clearer grasp of (i) the distinctive mental states targeting them and (ii) what success for such mental states amounts to” (Kriegel, 2018, p. 285). With regard to aesthetics, it seems that this view has a correct core, but is too euphoric. Kriegel is definitely right when he suggests that Brentano argued for a psychologistic approach in aesthetics. He is also right when he argues that the idea of “fitting attitudes” takes a prominent place in Brentano’s aesthetics. For Brentano, aesthetics is based on presentations that arouse emotions that can be accurate or not.²⁰ The problem is just: Brentano does not go much further. In particular, he does not develop a theory of art, nor does he present a detailed outline of his views in aesthetics. All we have left are some smaller texts on quite particular problems and lecture notes for Brentano’s courses on aesthetics that he gave in the mid-1880s at the University of Vienna. Alas, Brentano’s original notes have been heavily revised by the editors, who took the liberty of cutting, revising, and emending the text in the hope to make it more accessible – but did not care to document the changes.

One might be tempted to suggest that the very idea of a system-philosopher has a strongly individualistic bias, as it focuses exclusively on the genial sketch of a single philosopher, but does not contemplate the possibility of a collective effort in erecting the system. Following this second strand one could argue, however, that Brentano’s contribution to the system consisted in providing its basis in the form of a handful of guiding ideas and in acknowledging that he did not work them out in all detail. This latter task, one could suggest, was to be assigned to his students and followers, who had the patience to work out the details – and that this is true in particular in the field of aesthetics.

There are at least two reasons why we should be sceptical with regard to this line of reasoning. First of all, it does not seem to me that Brentano’s guiding intuitions could be regarded as a firm and durable foundation for a future system. If we reduce this intuition to

²⁰ For a more detailed outline of Brentano’s view on aesthetics, cf. Huemer, 2017.

his categorization of mental phenomena and the idea that their success depends on fitting-conditions, the basis would be too meagre to constitute a full-blown system. If, on the other hand, we add details of Brentano's view concerning the nature of presentations, judgments, and emotions, we would have to conclude that he did not provide a stable foundation, but rather a dynamic system that underwent changes as progress was made. Secondly, Brentano did not actively assign special fields of study to his students. While it is true that we can observe some degree of specialization among some of the members of the Brentano school – Anton Marty focused on the philosophy of language, Carl Stumpf on auditory experiences, Edmund Husserl on the philosophy of mathematics – these assignments do not seem to have been arranged by Brentano, and they do not at all cover all philosophical disciplines. In particular, questions concerning ethics and aesthetics – two fields that are, according to Kriegel's interpretation, central in Brentano's system – do not seem to be discussed in any prominent manner among members of the Brentano school.²¹ Moreover, Emil Utitz recalls in his reminiscences of Franz Brentano that the latter had actively discouraged him to specialize on aesthetics, for he feared that “in these topics one can hardly go beyond the most basic principles” (cf. Utitz, 1959, p. 102),²² which clearly suggests that he was not looking out for someone who could hammer out the details of a theory of beauty for him.

6. Conclusion: Brentano – a systematic, but not a system-philosopher

Brentano planned to compose a comprehensive work on psychology, but did not succeed in completing this task – for he never submitted the second volume that was dedicated to hammer out the details of his three-partition of mental phenomena. Does this show that he wanted to create a philosophical system? Kriegel suggests that Brentano had a unified theory of the true, the good, and the beautiful. It seems to me, however, that Brentano merely had strong guiding intuitions along which research in these fields could be conducted and which have shaped his views on truth, on moral philosophy, and on aesthetics, but he never fully worked out the details. Moreover, I think we would not do justice to Brentano's theory if we

²¹ These topics were discussed only in the Graz school, by Meinong and his students (cf. Huemer, 2009); but the relations between Brentano and the Graz school were not exactly friendly and it would definitely not be correct to think that Brentano would have assigned them the task to work out the details of this central aspects of his system.

²² My translation: *Brentano befürchtete, daß man in diesen Fragestellungen nur sehr schwer über eine "Vorschule" hinauskommen werde.*

thought of him as a system-philosopher. First, because we would have to conclude that Brentano had ambitions of erecting a system, but in the end failed in doing so. Secondly, because this characterization does not do justice to the idea that Brentano's guiding intuitions, rather than a failure, were extremely fruitful and influential. It is, in my view, a strength of Brentano's philosophy that he did not start from abstract and sacrosanct principles, as system philosophers usually do. He rather was willing to come back to convictions he held in the past and revise them when necessary. And Brentano did so, whenever progress in some detailed analyses required him to do so, for he always made sure not to get lost in the details and to keep the "bigger picture" in mind. For this reason, I think it is absolutely adequate to call Brentano a systematic philosopher, i.e. a philosopher who aimed at approaching philosophical (and psychological) problems *in a systematic and scientific manner* (as it is correct to insist that Brentano despised system philosophy).

If one insists on calling Brentano's philosophical position a *system* – even if one understands systematic philosophy not as a top-down approach that imposes theory on the phenomena, as Kriegel does – one risks committing the very same mistake that system-philosophers tend to make: to force a simplified explanatory scheme onto the actual phenomena. This strategy very often does not succeed in doing justice in the complexity of the phenomena in question. For sure, there are unifying themes in Brentano's philosophy. We can even discern a sensibility to the "bigger picture" – but, not to an extent that would justify calling these aspects distinguishing criteria that set Brentano's theory apart from that of other philosophers, both in the analytic and the continental traditions.

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