

Brentano's Classification of Mental Phenomena

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In Chapter 3 of Book I of *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, Brentano articulates what he takes to be the four most basic and central tasks of psychology. One of them is to discover the 'fundamental classification' of mental phenomena. Brentano attends to this task in Chapters 5-9 of Book II of the *Psychology*, reprinted (with appendices) in 1911 as a standalone book (Brentano 1911a). The classification is further developed in an essay entitled "A Survey of So-Called Sensory and Noetic Objects of Inner Perception," published posthumously in Brentano 1928/1981b, as well as a 1907 dictation entitled "Loving and Hating," reprinted in Brentano 1969.

1. The Fundamental Classification

To produce a classification, or taxonomy, of phenomena in some domain is to order them by genus-species relations. Thus, it is part of zoological taxonomy that the dog is a species of mammal. A *full* zoological classification organizes *all* zoological phenomena (animals) into a comprehensive scheme of genus-species relations. Likewise, a full classification of mental phenomena would organize them into such a genus-species scheme. According to Brentano, such a scheme is not merely pragmatic, but must correctly capture natural homogeneity and heterogeneity relations in the phenomena themselves (Brentano 1973a: 177).

The genus-species relation is relative: the dog is a species relative to the mammal, but a genus relative to the beagle. Likewise, visual perception is a genus

relative to color perception, but a species relative to perception. The highest mental genus is mentality as such. Just below it are mental phenomena which are species of only one mental genus, namely mentality as such. These are what Brentano refers to as the ‘fundamental classes’ of mental phenomena. Accordingly, the task of producing the fundamental classification of mental phenomena is that of identifying those mental phenomena which are species of only one mental genus.

According to Brentano, there are three such classes: presentation (*Vorstellung*), judgment (*Urteil*), and ‘interest’ (*Interesse*) or ‘emotion’ (*Gemütsbewegungen*) (Brentano 1973a: 198). Although Brentano considers presentation the most basic of the three, insofar as the other two are grounded in it (1973a: 80, 198), my exposition will proceed in a different order.

The fundamental class Brentano calls judgment covers any mental state that presents what it does as true or false (veridical or falsidical, accurate or inaccurate, and so on):

By “judgment” we mean, in accordance with common philosophical usage, acceptance (as true) or rejection (as false) (Brentano 1973a: 198).

Importantly, this includes not only the products of conceptual thought, such as belief, but also perceptual experience. A visual experience of a yellow lemon has veridicality conditions in the same sense belief has truth conditions. Both are in the business of *getting things right*. Accordingly, Brentano writes that “all perceptions are judgments, whether they are instances of knowledge of just mistaken affirmations” (Brentano 1973a: 209). What characterizes judgment is this kind of *truth-directedness* (see CHAP. 10).

This contrasts with Brentano’s second fundamental class, whose essential feature is not truth-directedness but *goodness-directedness*:

Just as every judgment takes an object to be true or false, in an analogous way every phenomenon which belongs to this class takes an object to be good or bad. (Brentano 1973a: 199; see also 1973a: 239)

This category covers a large group of phenomena, including emotion, affect, the will, and pain/pleasure. For this reason, Brentano has no satisfactory name for this class, and calls it alternately interest, emotion, or (often) ‘phenomena of love and hate.’ What unifies these phenomena is the fact that they present what they do as good or bad. Wanting a beer presents beer as good, but so does taking pleasure in the beer, wishing for beer, liking beer, and so on (see CHAP 11).

Brentano’s other fundamental class is presentation.¹ This is supposed to be an intentional state that in itself presents what it does neither as true or false nor as good or bad, but in an entirely neutral manner. Its most general characterization is thus this: ‘We speak of a presentation whenever something appears to us’ (Brentano 1973a: 198). This is the sense in which presentation grounds judgment and interest: every state of judgment or interest is also a presentation, but not every presentation is either a judgment or an interest. This means that some mental phenomena are *mere* presentations. When you contemplate or entertain something, it appears to you neither as true/false nor as good/bad; it just appears to you.

Brentano’s three fundamental classes, then, are three modes of presenting something: “neutral” presenting (presentation), presenting as true/false (judgment), and presenting as good/bad (interest). All mental phenomena belong to one of these classes, and each class is a species of only one mental genus, mentality as such.

We might be tempted to “translate” this into modern jargon through the notion of *direction of fit*.² The idea would be that judgment has a mind-to-world (‘thetic’) direction of fit, interest a world-to-mind (‘telic’) direction of fit, and presentation a null direction of fit. This is plausible, but only if we construe direction of fit in terms of modes of presenting. In current philosophy of mind, direction of fit is often glossed in terms of functional role: the mind-to-world direction amounts to *inferential* role, the world-to-mind direction to *motivational* role. This kind of functional classification is rejected by Brentano as extensionally inadequate. For it fails to classify wish as a form of interest:

Kant defined the faculty of desire as ‘the capacity of one’s ideas to bring the objects of those ideas into existence.’ ... This is why we find in Kant that curious claim that any wish, even if it were recognized to be impossible, for example the wish to have wings, is an aspiration to attain what is wished for and includes the idea of our desire’s causal efficacy. This is a desperate attempt to bring the boundary line that the one set of considerations requires into harmony with the other one. (Brentano 1973a: 259)

It is possible to wish for what is unachievable (immortality, say), which means that wish is not characterized by a motivational functional role – and yet it is a state of interest, precisely because it presents what it does *as good*. Thus if we want to use the modern notion of direction of fit to elucidate Brentano’s trichotomy, we must not construe direction of fit functionally but in terms of presentational modes.

2. Brentano’s Argument for his Fundamental Classification

Presumably, there is more than one fundamental classification of mental phenomena both exhaustive and exclusive. What makes Brentano’s specific one better than others?

Brentano’s argument for his fundamental classification focuses on the role of presentational mode in capturing the deep homogeneity and heterogeneity relations among mental phenomena:

Nothing distinguishes mental phenomena from physical phenomena more than the fact that something is [intentionally] immanent as an object in them. For this reason it is easy to understand that the fundamental differences in the way something exists in them as an object constitute the principal class differences among mental phenomena. (1973a: 197)

Since intentionality is the deep mark of the mental (see CHAP. 4), the definitive property of mentality as such, different *kinds* of intentionality should distinguish different kinds of mentality. Compare: if a vehicle is a machine that gets you from A to B, then different *kinds* of vehicle are distinguished by the different *ways* they get you from A to B (flying, floating, wheeling, and so on).

In other words, Brentano adopts mode of intentional directedness as his principle of *classification* because intentional directedness is his principle of *demarcation*. Once adopted, this principle of classification delivers his classification:

It is clear that all modes of [intentional] relation to an object fall into three classes: presentation, judgment, and emotion. The second and third modes always presuppose the first. (Brentano 1981b: 42)

As we saw, presentation is characterized by the neutral mode, judgment by the present-as-true/false mode, and emotion or interest by the present-as-good/bad mode.

Brentano's argument is this, then: 1) the correct principle for classifying mental phenomena is by mode of intentionality; 2) the three fundamental modes of intentionality are presentation (neutral presenting), judgment (presenting as true or false), and interest (presenting as good or bad); therefore, 3) the three fundamental classes of mental phenomena are presentation, judgment, and interest. The argument is clearly valid. What supports Premise 1 is (i) the claim that intentionality demarcates the mental and (ii) the idea that the principle of classification should derive from the principle of demarcation. What supports Premise 2 is Brentano's careful analysis, in the *Psychology*, of the relation between (i) presentation and judgment (Chapter 7) and (ii) feeling and will (Chapter 8).

3. The Non-Fundamental Classification

The fundamental classification of mental phenomena divides them into species of only one mental genus, mentality as such. But the resulting fundamental classes have their own species, which have their own species, and so on. A full taxonomy of mental phenomena would thus require some non-fundamental classifying too.

In the *Psychology*, Brentano goes very little beyond the fundamental classification. He divides judgment and interest into a positive and a negative variety: judgment into acceptance – (*Anerkennung*) and rejection (*Verwerfung*),

interest into love (*Liebe*) and hate (*Hasse*) – while denying that a similar distinction applies to presentation. Recall that judgment is characterized by presenting what it does as true or false. It is clear from this that the two main species of judgment are (i) mental acts that present what they do as true and (ii) mental acts that presents what they do as false. The former Brentano calls acceptance, the latter rejection.³ In the same way, interest divides into two species: (i) love, which presents what it does as good, and (ii) hate, which presents what it does as bad.⁴

Later in his career, Brentano distinguished two kinds of acceptance and rejection: ‘assertoric’ and ‘apodictic.’ Assertoric acceptance presents what it does as *contingently* true, while apodictic acceptance presents what it does as *necessarily* true (Brentano 1982b: 42). Importantly, these are still differences in mode of presenting, not in what is presented. In modern parlance, they are difference in attitude rather than content. Thus, an apodictic judgment that $2+2=4$ has $2+2=4$ as content; the commitment to the *necessary* truth of this content is part of the judgment’s attitude.⁵

As we saw, the domain of interest is analogous to that of judgment in dividing into positive and negative: love presents what it does as good, hate as bad. There is, however, an important disanalogy between the domains of interest and judgment: we can present things as *better* or *worse*, but not as truer or falser. Accordingly, Brentano posits a third sui generis species of interest on a par with love and hate: preference (Brentano 1969: 26, 143). To prefer x over y is to present x as better than y in the same sense in which to love x is to present x as good. For all three, there is a further distinction analogous to the assertoric/apodictic distinction. Consider the difference between loving ice cream, on the one hand, and loving happiness, on the other. There is a sense in which the latter love derives from the very nature of what is presented, whereas the former love is contingent. Likewise for hating eating licorice versus hating being tortured, or preferring happiness over being tortured versus preferring ice cream over licorice (Brentano 1982b: 42-3).⁶

As for presentation, unlike judgment and interest it does not come in a positive and a negative varieties. Nor is there an assertoric/apodictic-like distinction in this case. However, there is an important difference in mode that characterizes presentation. This is the distinction between a direct mode (*modus recto*) and an oblique mode (*modus oblique*) of presenting things. When you think that your friend wants a vacation, your thought presents your friend *directly*, but it also presents a vacation *obliquely*. Interestingly, according to Brentano temporal orientation is based on this modal distinction: when you think that Mandela has already died, what your thought comes down to is that Mandela’s death predates the occurrence of that very thought, which means that the thought presents itself *directly* and Mandela’s death *obliquely* (Brentano 1982b: 36). Objects presented obliquely in this way need not exist for judgments based on the relevant presentation to be true; by contrast, objects presented directly must exist if any judgment based on those presentations is to be true.

The result is the following classification, both fundamental and not, of mental phenomena:

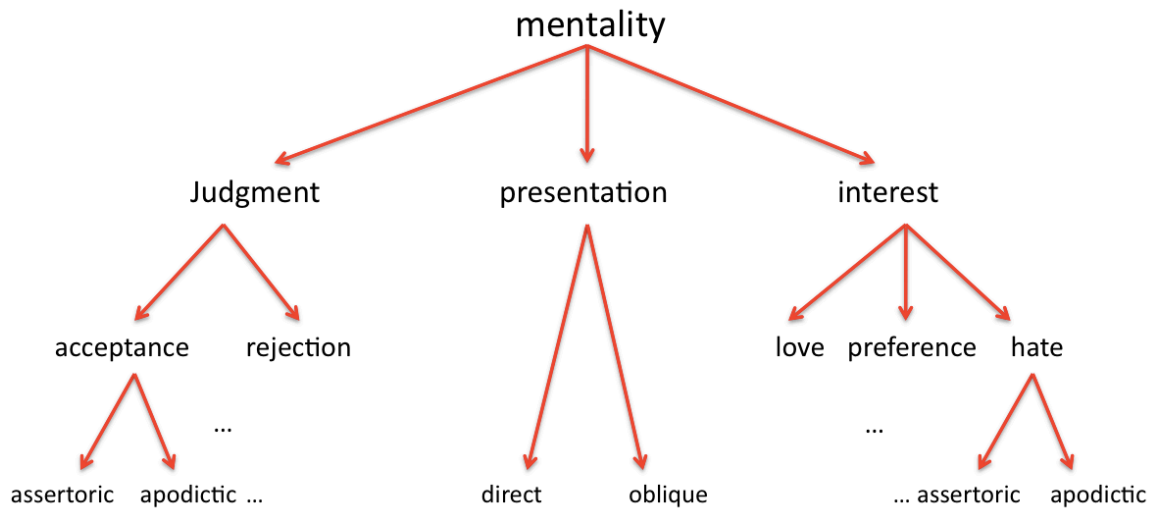


Figure 1. Brentano’s classification of mental phenomena

This may well be a *complete* as far as *modes* of intentionality go. Further classifications are possible, but only by *contents*.⁷ Some of these, however, are quite important. For example, the distinction between the sensory and the intellectual is, for Brentano, a difference in the objects presented: some presentations are directed at sensibles and some at intelligibles (1982b: 44).⁸ One may further divide sensory presentations according to the types of sensibles they present. Somewhat oddly, Brentano does not do so according to the five/six senses, but argues instead that there are three main classes of sensibles: colors, sounds, and the rest (1982b: 48; see CHAP. 8).

Conclusion: The Place of the Classification in Brentano's Philosophy

The fundamental classification of mental phenomena is a centerpiece of Brentano's philosophy of mind. The original, six-book plan for the *Psychology* involved a Book III on presentation, a Book IV on judgment, and a Book V on interest (see Rollinger 2012 for details). But it also serves a foundational role in Brentano's wider philosophical program: his metaphysics is based in part on the theory of judgment, his metaethics in part on his theory of interest, and his aesthetics on his theories of presentation and interest (see CHAP. 2).⁹

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¹ Brentano's '*Vorstellung*' is variously translated as presentation, representation, idea, thought, and contemplation. Here I go with 'presentation.'

² For more on the notion of direction of fit, see Searle 1983.

³ It is significant that for Brentano these constitute two categorically different kinds. On this view, to disbelieve that *p* is not just to believe that $\sim p$. Nor is it to fail to believe that *p*. Rather, it is a sui generis attitude irreducible to belief's presence or absence, an attitude that employs its own proprietary mode of intentional directedness. In this respect, disbelief parallels displeasure: being displeased that *p* is nothing like being pleased that $\sim p$.

⁴ Clearly, the terms 'love' and 'hate' are used in a wide sense here. I love my wife, but I also love ice cream. It is the second, less demanding sense of 'love' that Brentano has in mind (1973a: 199).

⁵ Likewise, an apodictic judgment that $2+2\neq 5$ presents as necessarily false that $2+2=5$.

⁶ There is also the important distinction between intrinsic and instrumental varieties of interests (Brentano 1969: 144). We love happiness for its own sake, but dental health for the sake of something else. It is unclear to me, however, whether Brentano takes this distinction to pertain to the mode of presentation (attitude) or to the object presented (content).

⁷ At one point in the *Psychology*, Brentano tells us that there must exist modal differences between sub-classes of interest (Brentano 1973a: 250), but without telling us what they are. By contrast, Brentano does suggest, for example, some content differences between pain/pleasure and will (1973a 249), and what appear to be content differences between will and (at least some) emotions (Brentano 1969: 150).

⁸ This is in the first instance a distinction between kinds of presentation. But it resurfaces in judgments based on these presentation: judgments that accept or reject sensibles are perceptions, ones that accept or reject intelligibles are judgments in the more traditional, conceptual sense.

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