

HOW TO SPEAK OF EXISTENCE:  
A BRENTANIAN APPROACH TO (LINGUISTIC AND  
MENTAL) ONTOLOGICAL COMMITMENT

Uriah KRIEGEL  
Jean Nicod

*Summary*

To a first approximation, ontology is concerned with what exists, metaontology with what it means to say that something exists. So understood, metaontology has been dominated by three views: (i) existence as a substantive first-order property that some things have and some do not, (ii) existence as a formal first-order property that everything has, and (iii) existence as a second-order property of existents' distinctive properties. Each of these faces well-documented difficulties. In this chapter, I want to expound a fourth theoretical option, which unfortunately has remained 'under the radar.' This is Franz Brentano's view, according to which to say that X exists is not to attribute a property at all (first- or second-order), but to say that the correct attitude to take toward X is that of accepting or believing in it.

1. *Introduction: Metaontology and existence talk*

Moral philosophy is usefully divided into ethics and metaethics. Oversimplifying considerably, the distinction is this: ethics is concerned with which things are good, metaethics with what it means to say that something is good. The goal of ethics is to produce a comprehensive list of all the good things (in the broadest sense of the term). Metaethics concerns a more fundamental question: when we say that X is good, what exactly are we saying? In a way, ethics is concerned with the *extension* of the concept GOOD, metaethics with its *intension*.

This is an oversimplification in at least two ways. First, ethics and metaethics are concerned with other normative concepts, such as RIGHT, VIRTUE, and REASONS. Secondly, metaethics deals with other issues, such as moral epistemology—how we can come to know what things are good. Still, there

is a clear sense in which answering the question of what exactly we are doing when we say that something is good lies at the heart of metaethics.

A similar division of labor may be applied to ontology and metaontology. Again oversimplifying, ontology is concerned with what exists, metaontology with what it means to say that something exists. The goal of ontology is to produce a comprehensive list of existents; that of metaontology is to answer the question of what exactly we are saying when we say that X exists. To that extent, ontology is concerned with the extension of the concept *EXISTENCE*, metaontology with its intension.

One way in which this oversimplifies is that ontology may well be concerned with other concepts, such as *GROUNDING*, *FUNDAMENTALITY*, or *ESSENCE*.<sup>1</sup> Another is that metaontology is also concerned with other issues, notably the methodology of ontology.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, there is a sense in which at the heart of metaontology lies the question ‘when we say that X exists, what exactly are we saying?’

To this question, there are three prominent answers in the extant literature. According to the first, to say that X exists is to attribute to X a substantive, discriminating first-order property that some things have and some do not (Meinong 1904, Parsons 1980). According to the second, it is to attribute a second-order property of existents’ distinctive properties or of the concept designed to pick them out (Frege 1884, Russell 1905). According to the third answer, more popular in recent discussions, to say that X exists is to attribute to X a formal, *undiscriminating* first-order property that everything has (Williamson 2002, van Inwagen 2003). Each of these has met with strong resistance and faces extraordinary objections, but have also been admirably defended. My main goal here is to present a fourth alternative, drawn from Brentano’s metaontology. Just by way of motivating the search for another approach to existence talk, §2 offers a brief survey of these views and some of their immediate difficulties.

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1. See Schaffer (2009) for a view of ontology as concerned primarily with grounding and fundamentality rather than existence, and Lowe (2008) for the view that essence is a central part of what ontology is about.

2. Thus, debates over Quine’s (1948) quantificational method vs. Armstrong’s (2004) truth-maker method belong within the sphere of metaontology.

2. *Three approaches to existence claims*

The simplest view is that to say that X exists is to attribute a substantive property to X. When I say that Obama is president, I attribute to Obama a certain property, namely the property of being president. In exactly the same manner, when I say that Obama exists, I attribute to him a property, this time the property of existing. President, existent, confident, American—those are all Obama-esque attributes on a par. Accordingly, existential claims are at bottom of a kind with predicative claims: ‘ducks are cute’ and ‘there are ducks’ *look* different, but the latter is just an unhelpful rendering of ‘ducks are existent.’

Dissatisfaction with this approach is rife. There are technical problems to do with negative existentials and existential generalization. From ‘Jimmy is not president’ I can infer ‘there is a non-president.’ If existential claims work just like predicative ones, from ‘Shrek does not exist’ I should be able to infer ‘there is a nonexistent.’ But this requires a distinction between ‘there is’ and ‘exists’ that many find odious. There are also non-technical problems: as Hume (1739 I,II,vi) noted, the idea of existence adds nothing to the idea of an object. The idea of a cute duck is different from the idea of a duck, which means that the idea of cuteness contributes something to the idea of a cute duck. But the idea of an existing duck is nowise different from the idea of a duck; so it is unclear what the idea of existence is supposed to contribute.

Perhaps the most dominant view historically is that in saying that X exists we are attributing a property not to X, but either (i) to X’s distinctive, individuating *properties* or (ii) to the *concept* of X. In the first case, we attribute the property of being instantiated; in the second, that of referring. In both versions, existence is construed as a *second-order* property, since it is not a property of X itself but of some properties of X or the concept of X. Thus when I say that Obama exists, what I am doing is attributing to the properties that individuate Obama (whatever they are) the property of being instantiated, or else attributing to the concept OBAMA the property of referring. Likewise, when I say that dragons do not exist, I am saying that dragon-hood is uninstantiated, or else that DRAGON is empty.

This approach raises its own set of difficulties. Some are technical and pertain to its application to singular existentials. The approach can be applied to ‘Obama exists’ only if the proper name ‘Obama’ is semantically associated with certain properties. For example, if ‘Obama’ just means ‘the actual 44<sup>th</sup> US president,’ then perhaps in saying that Obama exists we are

saying that the property of being the actual 44<sup>th</sup> US president is instantiated (or else that the concept of the actual 44<sup>th</sup> US president refers). But many philosophers deny that ‘Obama’ is associated with *any* properties, holding instead that it refers *directly* to the individual himself, without mediation by properties (or concepts) (Kripke 1972). There are also non-technical problems with the approach: it implies that in saying that Obama exists, we are not saying anything *about Obama*; in fact, we are not speaking of Obama at all, but of some different entity. What we are speaking of is not even a concrete particular, but a property or a concept. This feels wrong: saying that X exists feels like a comment on X, not on something else suitably related to X.<sup>3</sup> When we exclaim excitedly that the Higgs boson exists, it is the discovery of the boson that excites us.

A view gathering momentum in recent metaontology is that existence is a first-order property of things, but not a substantive, discriminating one that divides entities into two subsets, those which have the property and those which do not. Rather, it is a formal or pleonastic property that everything has. Other logical or formal properties are like that as well: the property of being self-identical does not divide entities into two subsets either.

Since the view is more recent, there have not yet emerged standard objections to it in the literature. But one immediate worry is that it is unclear on this view how we might *acquire the concept* of existence. The most basic way to acquire the concept of F by interacting sufficiently with Fs and non-Fs to develop a sensitivity to the difference between them. But if existence were a formal property of everything, this kind of differential interaction with existents and nonexistents would be ruled out. Some concepts we acquire purely by putting together other concepts acquired through differential interaction: we can acquire the concept BACHELOR, for example, by putting together MAN and UNMARRIED. However, we can do this only where there are *genus et differentia*. If existence is a property of *everything*, it cannot be a species of any other, more generic property. Finally, it might be claimed that EXISTENCE is simply an *innate* concept. But for the view not to be mysterian, it must construe innate concepts as acquired phylogenetically rather than ontogenetically through the same two mechanisms that we have just ruled out for existence as a universal property.

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3. See Frege (1884, 67) for the explicit claim that ‘X exists’ is not about X, and Thomasson (2015 Chap. 2) for criticism of it.

Some philosophers have proposed to adopt all three notions of existence but apply them to different regions of our existence discourse (Voltolini 2012). For example, one might hold that certain simples arranged table-wise exist in the sense that they exhibit the substantive first-order property, the table they compose exists in the sense that it exhibits the formal first-order property, and the artifactual kind Table (to which it belongs) exists in the sense that it exhibits the second-order property of being instantiated. Note, however, that the mentioned problems of the three views of existence are not problems for the claim that the relevant view accounts for *all* cases of existence, but for the claim that it accounts for *any*. Therefore, in committing to all three kinds of existence, one would be *amassing* all three views' problems, rather than avoiding any of them.

To be sure, proponents of each view have offered various responses to these and other problems facing them. I do not wish to dwell on these matters here. Instead, I want to articulate an alternative approach—a coherent and stable account of existence talk that has not as yet received a proper airing. This fourth alternative was developed by Franz Brentano (1930, 1933), but has seen virtually no uptake outside the circles of Brentano scholarship.<sup>4</sup> My goal is to motivate Brentano's position to a wider audience and show that it merits serious consideration. I start by drawing out three assumptions shared by the three more familiar views of existence talk; at least two of them are rejected in the Brentanian alternative.

### 3. *Commitment to existence: Linguistic and mental*

To say that X exists is to perform a certain linguistic act. The performance of this act commits the performer to X's existence. To that extent, we may think of the act of saying that X exists as *linguistic existence-commitment*. Asserting 'X exists' is of course only one form of linguistic existence-commitment. Other include asserting 'there is an X,' 'there exist no Xs,' 'X is,' 'the Xs are existent,' and so on.

It is, of course, possible to commit oneself to the existence of X without saying anything. I may think to myself that X exists and keep the thought to myself. This would also be a form of existence-commitment,

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4. Brentano worked on this in two main periods of his life. His doctoral dissertation was on the notion of existence in Aristotle (Brentano 1862), but he returned to the topic forty years later and composed (or dictated, once he turned blind circa 1907) a number of important essays and lecture notes; most are collected in Brentano 1930, some in Brentano 1933.

but not of *linguistic* existence-commitment. Rather, it is a form of *mental* existence-commitment. Mental existence-commitment is commitment to something's existence *in thought*, whereas linguistic existence-commitment is commitment to something's existence *in language*.

One assumption shared by all three familiar views of existence talk is that linguistic existence-commitment is a matter of attributing a property to something. The three views differ on what property is attributed and what it is attributed to, but they agree that some property is attributed to something.

A second shared assumption is that mental existence-commitment, like linguistic existence-commitment, is a matter of attributing a property to something, indeed the same property to the same thing. On one view to judge that Obama exists is to mentally attribute a substantive first-order property to Obama, on another it is to mentally attribute a formal first-order property to Obama, and on a third view it is to attribute a second-order property to the Obamarific properties (or to OBAMA).

The third shared assumption follows straightforwardly from the other two. It is that there is no difference between linguistic and mental existence-commitment other than that one is linguistic and the other mental. The two are structurally the same, but carried out in different representational media. There is no *deep* difference in the mechanics of commitment to existence, it is just that one kind of commitment is linguistically encoded while the other is mentally encoded.

All three assumptions are very natural to make, but as we will see, Brentano rejects the first two (and even the third looks very different in his account). Like many modern philosophers of mind, Brentano presupposes the priority of the mental over the linguistic.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, he starts from an account of mental existence-commitment, on which basis he devises an account of linguistic existence-commitment. These are taken up in §§4–5.

#### 4. *Mental existence-commitment: Brentano's attitudinal account*

When I think to myself that Obama exists, I mentally commit to the existence of Obama. As noted, the three familiar views share the assumption

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5. This notion can take several forms, but prominently, it is a widespread view that linguistic representation derives from mental representation, and accordingly that linguistic *content* (meaning) derives from mental content (Grice 1969, Searle 1983, Cummins 1989). All these claims seem to be presupposed by Brentano.



that in doing so, I attribute a property to something. Underlying this is an even deeper assumption: that the commitment to Obama's existence is an aspect of the relevant thought's *content*. The property attributed is a constituent of the content of my thought. On the first-order views, the content is <Existence, Obama>; on the second-order one, it is <Instantiatedness, Obamarific properties>. Either way, some existence-related property figures in the content of existence-committing mental acts.

Brentano rejects this too. For him, mental commitment to something's existence is not an aspect of a thought's content, but of its attitude. The content/attitude terminology is modern: we say that a belief that *p* and a belief that *q* involve the same attitude toward different contents, but that a belief that *p* and a desire that *p* involve different attitudes toward the same content.<sup>6</sup> Put in those terms, the Brentanian idea is that existence-commitment is an *attitudinal property* of some mental states. A mental state that commits to the existence of X is not one that represents X's existence, but one that simply represents X, but does so in an existence-affirming *manner*. The existence-affirmation is not a dimension of *what* the state represents but of *how* it represents.

We might put the point as follows: mental commitment to X's existence is not a matter of representing X as existent, but a matter of representing-as-existent X. This formulation is intended to bring out that the existential element is a modification of the representing, not a part of the represented. On this view, to think that Obama exists is to represent-as-existent Obama. The content of the thought is thus exhausted by Obama. Existence does not come into the thought at the level of content, but at the level of attitude. Some of our attitudes exhibit this attitudinal feature, some do not. All and only those that do incorporate a commitment to the existence of what shows up in their content. But the commitment itself does not show up in the content. It is an aspect of the attitude exclusively. Call this the *attitudinal account of mental existence-commitment*.

What motivates the attitudinal account for Brentano is reflection on the difference between believing that X exists and merely contemplating that X exists. The content of these two acts is identical, but one embodies mental commitment to X's existence while the other does not. Since any content that can be believed can also be contemplated, but contemplation never

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6. Brentano's terminology is different: his contrast is between the 'object' and the 'mode' of intentionality. To love a mockingbird is to represent an object, the mockingbird, under a mode, the love-mode. Brentano's claim is that commitment to Obama's existence is an aspect of an intentional state's mode, not object.

commits to the reality of what is contemplated, existence-commitment cannot come from the belief's content.<sup>7</sup>

(The point can be put more impressionistically in terms of the difference between fiction and non-fiction prose. In the opening pages of his novel *Father Goriot*, Balzac writes that what he is about to tell us is not just a story—'all is true.' But of course that is just part of the story. Nothing Balzac can write inside his story can make it more than a story. For his novel's status as fiction is not determined by anything inside the novel. The *cover* of a book can announce that it is fiction, or that it is non-fiction, but nothing in the book's pages can confine it to, or rescue it from, the status imputed on it by the cover. Analogously, nothing in the content of a mental act can determine whether what the act represents is intended as real or unreal. The committal or non-committal status of the act must come from outside its content, from the attitude it employs.)

If the existence part of my mental commitment to Obama's existence does not show up in the content of my thought, and the thought's content is exhausted by Obama, then we are dealing here with an *objectual* rather than *propositional* attitude, akin to fear and love.<sup>8</sup> It might seem odd to posit a *cognitive* attitude directed at objects and not propositions or states of affairs. However, we do speak not only of belief-that but also of belief-*in* (as in 'Jimmy believes in ghosts'). Belief-*in* is clearly a cognitive objectual attitude: the content of Jimmy's state is exhausted by ghosts, while the commitment to their existence comes from the attitude of believing-*in*.<sup>9</sup> The basic idea, then, is that to mentally commit to the existence of Obama is not to mentally attribute any property to Obama or any associated entity, but simply to adopt the attitude of believing-*in* toward Obama. Indeed, we may say that believing in Obama is a mental state whose content is Obama and whose attitude is characterized by the property of representing-as-existent.

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7. Consider: 'There have been some psychologists who have maintained that the belief in an object, the affirmation of it, consists in a compounding of presentations. For example, in the judgment "a tree exists," I would affirm the tree as subject and would add as predicate the presentation of something existing. This, however, is incorrect. For if it were correct, then someone who said "an existing tree," would be combining the very same presentations, and would thus also be expressing a belief in the tree. Yet this is not the case.' (Brentano 1928, 42)

8. The existence of objectual attitudes has sometimes been called into question but is ably defended by Forbes (2000) and Montague (2007) among others.

9. There are uses of 'belief in' that may denote a noncognitive attitude, as in 'believe in yourself' or 'we believe in the future' (which seem to denote emotional attitudes such as confidence and hope). But there is also the cognitive usage highlighted in the main text.



Among attitudes that do not incorporate commitment to X's existence, some expressly involve the opposite commitment, namely to X's *nonexistence*; others are 'existentially silent.' I would love to have a gold-coated private jet; my desire for such a jet, and my contemplation of it, commit me neither to the jet's existence nor to its nonexistence. They are non-committal on the question of the gold-coated jet's existence. By contrast, my belief that Shrek does not exist is not neutral in this way. It *takes a stand* on Shrek's existence—a negative stand. From a Brentanian perspective, this means that there must also be a cognitive objectual attitude that incorporates mental commitment to nonexistence. We may denote this attitude with the expression 'disbelief in': I disbelieve in Shrek in the same sense in which I believe in the Eiffel Tower, and I disbelieve in dragons in the same sense I believe in ducks. What characterizes disbelief-in is that it exhibits the attitudinal property of representing-as-nonexistent.

Brentano's terminology is different. He calls the cognitive objectual attitude that embodies mental commitment to something's existence 'acceptance' or 'acknowledgement' (*Anerkennung*) and the cognitive objectual attitude embodying commitment to nonexistence 'rejection' or 'dismissal' (*Verwerfung*). What matters for our present purposes is not the terminology, but the direction of explanation between existential belief-that and belief-in. Because of a long philosophical tradition of treating propositional attitudes as fundamental in cognition, it is natural for us to analyze 'S believes in X' in terms of 'S believes that X exists.' From a Brentanian perspective, however, this is philosophically misleading. The more fundamental notion is belief-in, precisely because it captures correctly the locus of existence-commitment (as pertaining to the attitude, not content). Accordingly, Brentano would propose to take 'S believes in X' as fundamental and paraphrase 'S believes that X exists' into it (for more on this see Kriegel forthcoming).<sup>10</sup>

Brentano's attitudinal account of mental existence-commitment does raise a problem. If mental existence-commitment is an aspect of existence-committing acts' *content*, then linguistic existence-commitment can be construed in terms of linguistic acts with the very same content. But this cannot work if mental existence-commitment is an aspect of mental acts' *attitude*. A structurally similar account of linguistic existence-commitment would still be possible if there was an existence-committing *force* in lan-

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10. Szabó (2003) and Textor (2007) also reject the analysis of 'S believes in X' in terms of 'S believes that X exists,' but on different grounds.

guage to parallel the existence-committing *attitude* in thought. But no such force appears to exist. In other words, there is no such thing as *linguistic* representing-as-existent. Perhaps assertion can be thought of as linguistic representing-ad-true, but that is not yet representing-as-existent. So what might existence *talk* amount to if Brentano is right about ‘existence *thought*’?

5. *Linguistic existence-commitment: Brentano’s fitting attitude account*

For Brentano, in asserting ‘X exists,’ we are not saying that X has the property of existing, nor that some X-distinctive properties are instantiated. What we are saying this: that X is a suitable object of acceptance, an appropriate intentional object of belief-in. We are saying that acceptance would be the correct attitude to take toward X, that is, that the right attitude to take toward X is that of believing in it. If X is to be an intentional object of belief-in or disbelief-in, it ought to be the object of belief-in. By contrast, when we say that Y does *not* exist, what we are saying is that if Y is to be an intentional object of belief-in or disbelief-in, it ought to be the object of *disbelief-in*. The correct attitude to take toward Y is that of disbelieving in it. In that sense, Y is a suitable (intentional) object of rejection or disbelief-in.<sup>11</sup>

This account of existence talk can be summarized, or sloganized, with what I will call *Brentano’s Dictum*:

(B1) To be is to be a fitting object of acceptance/belief-in.

Although I formulate Brentano’s dictum in the material mode of speech, it is intended in the first instance as an account of existence *talk*, that is, of linguistic existence-commitment. Note well: in B1, ‘object’ means *intentional object*, not *entity* or *concrete particular*. X is an object of my acceptance in the same sense that my wife is the object of my affection—she is that at which my affection is intentionally directed, and an existent is that at which fitting/correct acceptance is intentionally directed.

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11. The term Brentano prefers in this context is *Richtig*, most naturally translated as ‘correct’ or ‘fitting.’ But in one place he offers a number of synonyms—*konvenient*, *passend*, and *entsprechend* (Brentano 1889, 74)—which are more or less interchangeably translatable as ‘appropriate,’ ‘suitable,’ ‘fitting,’ and ‘adequate.’

Importantly, B1 is not intended as a substantive account of existence. By this I mean that it does not attempt to capture the intrinsic nature of a property of existence. The view is *not* that existence is the property whose nature is being-fittingly-acceptable. In fact, for Brentano *there is no such property as existence*, though there are of course existents.<sup>12</sup> This is precisely why existence-commitment cannot be part of the content of a mental state. There is not some *aspect* of the world, or of things in it, that we may call existence. There is just a *modification* of our awareness of things—a *way* we have of relating to the world (and the things in it) in thought—that we may call existence-commitment. Thus existence talk is in the first instance just a way of describing our awareness or representation of the world, not a way of describing the world itself.

One way to bring this point out is to formulate Brentano's Dictum in overtly contrastive terms. Compare:

- (B1a) To be is to be a fitting *rather than unfitting* object of acceptance.
- (B1b) To be is to be a fitting object of acceptance *rather than rejection*.

To be sure, B1a is true, insofar as all existents are fitting rather than unfitting objects of acceptance or belief-in. But B1a does not *account* for existence talk, it does not *explain* the function of such talk. What explains that is B1b, the thought that to say that X exists is to take a stand on which attitude it would be correct to take toward X, which attitude is *appropriate* for X.

To that extent, Brentano's account of existence talk can be thought of as a sort of *fitting-attitude account*. Such accounts have recently proliferated in metaethics (see Jacobson 2011). The basic idea is that for X to be good is for it to be a fitting object of approval or the like pro attitude; for X to be bad is for it to be a fitting object of disapproval or the like con attitude. Interestingly, Brentano is commonly admitted to be the first fitting-attitude theorist *of value* (Brentano 1889).<sup>13</sup> Importantly, however, Brentano never

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12. For example, he writes: 'In calling an object good we are not giving it a material (*sachliches*) predicate, as we do when we call something red or round or warm or thinking. In this respect the expressions good and bad are like the expressions existent and nonexistent. In using the latter, we do not intend to add yet another determining characteristic of the thing in question; we wish rather to say that whoever acknowledges [accepts] a certain thing and rejects another makes a true judgment. And when we call certain objects good and others bad we are merely saying that whoever loves [has a pro attitude to] the former and hates [has a con attitude to] the latter has taken the right stand.' (Brentano 1952, 90)

13. Brentano writes: 'We call a thing *good* when the love relating to it is correct. In the

intended this as a substantive account of the nature of value, but rather as an account of value talk. For him, there is no such property as goodness, though there are goods, just as there is no such property as existence, though there are existents.<sup>14</sup> Thus his accounts of the real and the good are intended to be structurally symmetrical, something he is quite explicit on in several places.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, we would be quite justified to call Brentano's approach a *fitting-attitude account of linguistic existence-commitment*.

It might be suggested that Brentano's account is a form of 'metaontological expressivism,' since it casts linguistic existence-commitment as a matter of expressing an attitude rather than describing a state of affairs. In *one* sense, this may well be right, since asserting that X exists may be taken to just express the attitude of believing in X. However, this is very different from expressivism as standardly thought of (in metaethics and elsewhere), since the attitude expressed, believing-in, is cognitive rather than conative or emotive. Accordingly, the so-called Frege-Geach Problem does not arise (Geach 1960).<sup>16</sup> Suppose a subject judges both that there is a party and that if there is a party then there is booze, which leads her to judge that there is booze. The validity of this reasoning is captured in traditional *modus ponens*. In Brentano's hands, the reasoning must be recast as follows: the subject both believes in a party and disbelieves in a boozeless party, which leads her to believe in booze. It is true that the traditional formalization of *modus ponens* cannot be used to explain the

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broadest sense of the term, the good is that which is worthy of love, that which can be loved with a love that is correct.' (Brentano 1889, 18). Likewise: '... everything that can be thought about belongs in one of two classes—either the class of things for which love [pro attitude] is appropriate, or the class of things for which hate [con attitude] is appropriate. Whatever falls into the first class we call good, and whatever falls into the second we call bad.' (Brentano 1930, 21f.)

14. Brentano is clearest on this eliminativist take on goodness in a 1909 letter to Kraus: 'What you seek to gain here with your belief in the existence of goodness with which [pro attitudes] are found to correspond is incomprehensible to me' (Brentano 1966, 207, quoted in Pasquarella 1993, 238; see also Chisholm 1986, 51f.).

15. For discussion of the structural similarity between Brentano's accounts of existence and goodness, see Seron (2008) and Kriegel (forthcoming).

16. The Frege-Geach Problem is often raised for metaethical expressivism. The Problem that if moral statements are not descriptive, they could not play the kind of inferential role that they appear to. For example, one can reason as follows: if my sister did not visit my father in hospital yesterday, then I ought to do so today; she did not; therefore, I ought to. This type of inferential interaction appears to require a descriptive content on ought statements. If we construe moral statements as non-descriptive, and instead as expressive of commendations (say), they would not integrate as well into this kind of inference. For the following seems ill-formed: if my sister did not visit my father in hospital yesterday, then hurrah to visiting him today!; she did not; therefore, hurrah to visiting him today!

validity of this reasoning, but since the reasoning involves only cognitive states, all is needed is a reworking of inference rules within the Brentanian framework. Brentano sketches how to do this in Brentano 1956, but the framework is fully developed only by Peter Simons (1987), who

$$\frac{p \rightarrow q \quad p}{q}$$

with

$$\frac{Na^{-}b \quad Ea}{Eb}$$

This reads: *a* is not without *b*; *a* is; therefore, *b* is. With this rule in place, we can readily explain why the subject's reasoning to the conclusion that there is booze is valid. Hurrah: the Frege-Geach Problem is avoided!

The key notion in Brentano's fitting attitude account of existence talk is clearly that of acceptance. I now turn to fleshing out this notion.

## 6. *Acceptance*

Arguably, the best way to appreciate Brentano's notion of acceptance is to identify its theoretical role in the architecture of the mind (as Brentano conceives of it). That architecture is in turn best understood in the context of Brentano's lengthy discussion of the classification of mental phenomena. Brentano's terminology here is somewhat dated, so I will briefly present the classification in his own terms, then move to exposition in more modern terminology.

Brentano divides mental phenomena into three 'fundamental classes': presentation (*Vorstellung*), judgment (*Urteil*), and interest (*Interesse*). He also claims that judgment and interest are 'grounded in' presentations, but appears to allow a presentation to also occur without grounding other states. Unlike presentations, judgments and interests are each divided into two opposing kinds: judgment into acceptance (*Anerkennung*) and rejection (*Verwerfung*), interest into love (*Liebe*) and hate (*Hasse*).<sup>17</sup> The classification, in these terms, is as follows:

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17. See Brentano 1874, II Chap. 6–8, including: 'my three classes are not the same as those which are usually proposed. In the absence of more appropriate expressions we designate the

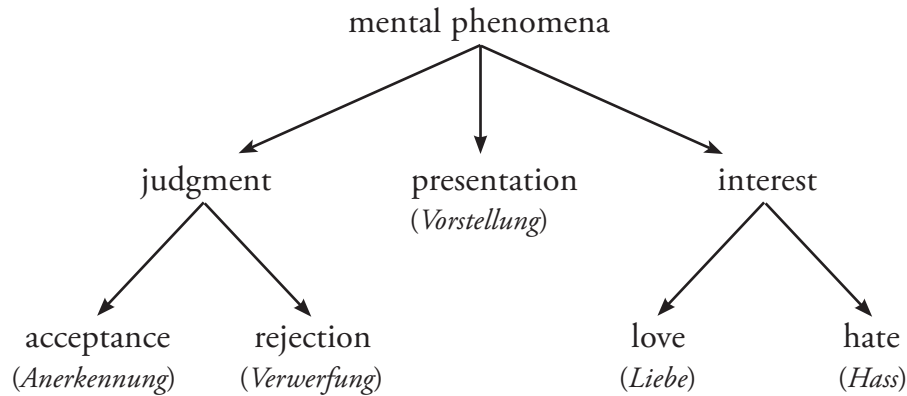


Figure 1. *Brentano's classification, in his terminology*

Some clarifications are called for.

First, Brentano uses the term 'judgment' in an extremely wide sense that covers all mental states with mind-to-world direction of fit (as we would say today).<sup>18</sup> More precisely, a judgment is any state that carries mental commitment to the truth or falsity of what it presents.<sup>19</sup> This includes believing, remembering, speculating, and the like ostensibly propositional attitudes. In addition, however, it includes perceptual states.<sup>20</sup> 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. Both have a mind-to-world direction of fit. Accordingly, both are judgments in Brentano's sense.

Secondly, it is significant that for Brentano judgments divide into two categorically different kinds, positive and negative. On this view, to

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first by the term "presentation," the second by the term "judgment," and the third by the terms "emotion," "interest," or "love." (Brentano 1874, 198) A clearer presentation of the view is this: 'It is clear that all modes of relation to an object fall into three classes: presentation, judgment, and emotion [interest]. The second and third modes always presuppose the first, and in both we find a contrast, in that a judgment is either a belief or a denial, and an emotion is either a form of love or hate.' (Brentano 1928, 42)

18. The distinction between mind-to-world (or 'thetic') direction of fit and world-to-mind (or 'telic') direction of fit is due to Anscombe (1957) and is developed by Searle (1983). The idea is that 'cognitive' mental states, such as belief, are supposed to fit themselves to the way the world is (we want our beliefs to fit the way the world is), whereas 'conative' mental states, such as desire, are supposed to have the world fit them (we want the world to fit the way our desires are).

19. Thus he writes: 'By "judgment" we mean, in accordance with common philosophical usage, acceptance (as true) or rejection (as false)' (Brentano 1874, 198).

20. See, e.g., Brentano 1874, 209.



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. Even if we accept the law of excluded middle—which not everybody does—there is on this view a psychologically real difference between believing that  $\sim p$  and disbelieving that  $p$ . The former involves mental commitment to the truth of  $\sim p$ , the latter mental commitment to the falsity of  $p$ . This is a psychologically real categorical difference between two kinds of act. In this respect, disbelief parallels displeasure: being displeased that  $p$  is nothing like being pleased that  $\sim p$ .<sup>21</sup> Thus believing and disbelieving can have the same content, and take the judgment attitude toward it, but one takes the positive-judgment attitude while the other takes the negative-judgment attitude. (What motivates this categorical distinction to Brentano is mostly (i) the testimony of his introspection, or rather his 'inner perception,'<sup>22</sup> and (ii) the straightforward account of negative existentials they allow for.<sup>23</sup>)

Thirdly, Brentano's interest category covers a large group of phenomena, including emotion, affect, the will, and pleasure/pain. Desiring that  $p$ , wishing that  $p$ , (dis)approving of  $p$ , being sad that  $p$ , being pained by  $p$ —all these belong to a single fundamental class, according to Brentano.<sup>24</sup> What unifies this class is this: just as states of judgment involve mental commitment to the truth or falsity of what they present, so states of interest involve mental commitment to the goodness or badness of what *they* present.<sup>25, 26</sup> We might say that they are all states with world-to-mind direction of fit.

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21. It might be objected that in the case of pleasure and displeasure, there is a *phenomenal* difference between the two kinds of acts. But for Brentano, there is also a phenomenal difference between belief and disbelief, at least in the sense that they appear differently to inner perception (which is the only sense of 'phenomenal difference' Brentano would accept).

22. Brentano distinguishes between inner *perception* (*Wahrnehmung*) and inner *observation* (*Beobachtung*), and identifies introspection with the latter (see, e.g., Brentano 1874, 29f.). The distinction is extremely important for Brentano's views on the structure of consciousness and on psychological methodology, but not very important for our present purposes.

23. In addition, Brentano harbors an evident penchant for pervasive symmetries, and the parallelism between positive and negative judgments on the one hand and positive and negative affective states on the other is arguably operative in making the view appealing to him.

24. This is argued for especially in Brentano 1874 II Chap. 8.

25. See, e.g., Brentano's lengthy note on the concepts of truth and existence in Brentano 1889: 73–5. The analogy is particularly explicit in some as yet unpublished lecture notes: 'The good relates to the third class of mental states [interest] as the true to the second [judgment]. Loving is analogous to affirming, hating to denying, rejecting.' (Ms 107c 231, quoted in Seron 2008, 37; see also Ms 107c 236, quoted in Seron 2008, 48f.).

26. Here, the terms 'goodness' and 'badness' are used in the most generic sense. Thus, the relevant notion of the good covers a good car, a good person, a good choice, and so on.

Fourthly, as in the case of judgment, interest divides into a positive kind and a negative kind. ‘Love’ is Brentano’s idiosyncratic term for all states that involve mental commitment to the goodness of what they represent—what we would call today *pro attitudes*. ‘Hate’ is his term for all *con* attitudes. Furthermore, these goodness- and badness-commitments are attitudinal properties. To like cats is not to represent cats as good, but to represent-as-good cats; to dislike raccoons is to represent-as-bad raccoons. Thus we obtain a pleasing symmetry between the cognitive domain and the conative domain, between judgment and interest.

Fifthly, it is not immediately clear that in claiming that judgment and interest are grounded in presentation, or have presentation as their grounds/foundations (*Grundlage*), Brentano has in mind the notion of grounding currently widely discussed.<sup>27</sup> One similarity, however, is that Brentanian grounding is a matter of *ontological asymmetric dependence*, or what Brentano calls ‘unilateral separability’: a mental state can be a presentation without being a judgment, but it cannot be a judgment without being a presentation.<sup>28</sup> (Compare: an animal cannot be a cat without being a mammal but it can be a mammal without being a cat; in that sense cat-ness is ontologically dependent upon mammal-hood.) More specifically, judgment and interest are obtained from presentation by two different attitudinal *modifications* (one embodying mental commitment to truth/falsity, the other embodying commitment to goodness/badness).

Sixthly, presentation can also remain unmodified—modified by neither type of mental commitment. That is how we obtain such states as merely entertaining that *p* or contemplating *p*, as well as phantasms and (day) dreaming. Such states are typically non-committal either on the truth or on the goodness of what they present. They involve neither a mind-to-world direction of fit nor a world-to-mind direction of fit; they are direction-of-fit-less, if you will. Where judgments represent-as-true/false and interests represent-as-good/bad, presentations merely represent. They thus constitute a third species of the genus of which judgment and interest are the other two species. Note that this creates a certain ambiguity in Brentano’s use of the term ‘presentation’: it is used both to denote the genus and to denote one of its species. To remove this ambiguity, we may refer to the species as ‘*mere presentation*.’

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27. See Fine (2001) for seminal work on the modern notion.

28. On the notion of unilateral (or ‘one-sided’) separability, see mostly Brentano 1982 Chap. 2.

To summarize, Brentano’s classification divides mental states into three ‘fundamental classes,’ but also into five kinds, insofar as it distinguishes two categorically different kinds of judgment and of interest. Crucially, the difference between all five kinds of state is an *attitudinal* difference—the content can be exactly the same.<sup>29</sup> Thus we get from Brentano five different kinds of *attitude*.<sup>30</sup> A mental state with the content that  $p$  may either (i) represent-as-true  $p$ , (ii) represent-as-false  $p$ , (iii) represent-as-good  $p$ , (iv) represent-as-bad  $p$ , or (v) merely-represent  $p$ . Brentano labels these five kinds of state acceptance, rejection, love, hate, and (mere) presentation. In more modern terminology, we would say that they are (i) positive states with mind-to-world direction of fit (paradigmatically: belief), (ii) negative states with mind-to-world direction of fit (paradigmatically: disbelief), (iii) positive states with world-to-mind direction of fit (paradigmatically: approval), (iv) negative states with world-to-mind direction of fit (paradigmatically: disapproval), and (v) states with no direction of fit (paradigmatically: contemplation). We may thus represent Brentano’s classification, terminologically updated, as follows:

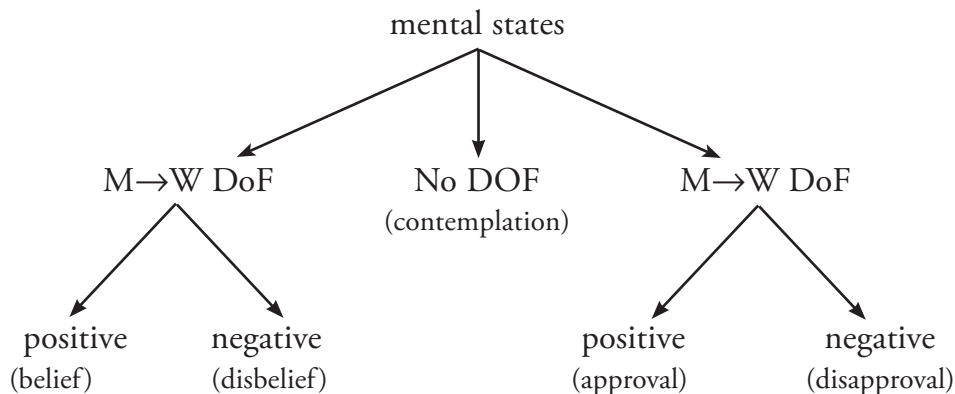


Figure 2. *Brentano’s classification, in modern terminology*

29. Brentano is explicit on the fact that what separates judgment from mere representation is their attitude, or as he puts it their ‘mode of awareness’ (*Weisen des Bewusstseins*). He writes: ‘When we say that presentation and judgment are different fundamental classes of mental phenomena... we mean that that they are two completely different modes of awareness of an object’ (Brentano 1874, 201; my translation).

30. They are five *at the relevant level of abstraction*. At other levels of abstraction they may be even more. For example, Brentano distinguishes between positive judgments that involve commitment to the necessity of what is represented and those that involve commitment to the contingency of what is represented. This too is an attitudinal difference for Brentano (see, e.g., Brentano 1930, 121), but it pertains to a *subspecies* of positive judgment (as well as of negative judgment).

This gives us a first handle on Brentano's notion of acceptance: acceptance is that state which fills the (i) spot in this classification, that is, a positive state with world-to-mind direction-of-fit.

This explains such straightforward statements of Brentano's approach to existence talk as this one (from an 1889 lecture):

Let us say that the area to which affirmative judgment is appropriate is the area of the existent ... and that the area to which the negative judgment is appropriate is the nonexistent. (Brentano 1930, 21)

Accordingly, Brentano's Dictum can be sharpened into the following thesis:

(B2) To be is to be a fitting object of a positive mental state with world-to-mind direction of fit.

This raises an immediate problem, however. In §4, we characterized acceptance as an *objectual* attitude that exhibits the attitudinal property of representing-as-existent. Here we appear to characterize it much more widely, as covering all positive attitudes with a mind-to-world direction of fit. This would appear to include believing-that, remembering-that, and other *propositional* attitudes exhibiting the attitudinal property of representing-as-true. The two characterizations appear to misalign. So which is the correct characterization of acceptance according to Brentano? The answer is that for Brentano this tension or misalignment is merely apparent. For on his view, *all judgments are existential*. Rather than defend this surprising but eminently defensible claim of Brentano's (Kriegel forthcoming), here I wish to show that the fitting attitude account of existence talk does not rely on it.<sup>31</sup>

### 7. *Believing in things*

Regardless of whether all judgments are objectual, the notion of believing in something, as a cognitive objectual attitude embodying existence-commitment, is clearly legitimate. There is clearly a psychologically real mental state corresponding to this description. Isolating it within the classification of mental states should therefore be possible, even if with greater complexity.

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31. Brentano develops his non-propositional account of judgment most fully in Brentano 1874 II Chap. 7, §§4–8 and §§13–15 (but see also Brentano 1956). The account is explained and motivated in Chisholm (1976) and Kriegel (forthcoming).

Thus, within the genus Brentano calls judgment, and which we identified as mental states with mind-to-world direction of fit, we may distinguish predicative and existential species, with the latter dividing into propositional and objectual subspecies. Predicative beliefs are such as that cats are cute; existential beliefs divide into propositional ones (e.g., the belief that there are cats) and objectual ones (e.g., the belief in cats). If we now focus on existential belief-that and belief-in, we see that each divides into a positive and a negative variety according to the operative attitudinal property. This produces a matrix of four types of existential belief: e.g., believing that there are cats, disbelieving that there are cats, believing in cats, and disbelieving in cats. Thus:

	<b><u>Positive</u></b>	<b><u>Negative</u></b>
<b><u>Propositional</u></b>	represent-as-true (belief-that)	represent-as-false (disbelief-that)
<b><u>Objectual</u></b>	represent-as-existent (belief-in)	represent-as-nonexistent (disbelief-in)

Figure 3. *Four types of existential state*

The result is a characterization of belief-in as a positive objectual existential state with mind-to-world direction of fit (see Figure 4 below). We can use this specification to further sharpen Brentano's Dictum:

(B3) To be is to be a fitting object of a positive objectual existential state with world-to-mind direction of it.<sup>32</sup>

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32. Recall that the relevant contrast for Brentano's Dictum's explanatory purposes is with other types of attitude. So we could even say: (B3b) To be is to be a fitting object of a positive cognitive objectual mental state with world-to-mind direction of it *as opposed to other mental states*. The 'other' mental states would be negative ones (such as disbelief), non-cognitive ones (such as perception), propositional ones (such as belief-that), or ones with a world-to-mind direction of fit (such as approval).

Mental existence-commitment, on this view, is a matter of taking the attitude encircled in Figure 4 toward something. And linguistic existence-commitment is a matter of asserting the suitability of some intentional object for this kind of mental existence-commitment. Thus, when we say that Obama exists, what we are saying is that toward Obama it is correct to take the attitude encircled in Figure 4. When we say that Shrek does not exist, meanwhile, what we are saying is that Shrek is a fitting intentional object for a *negative* objectual existential state with world-to-mind direction of it.

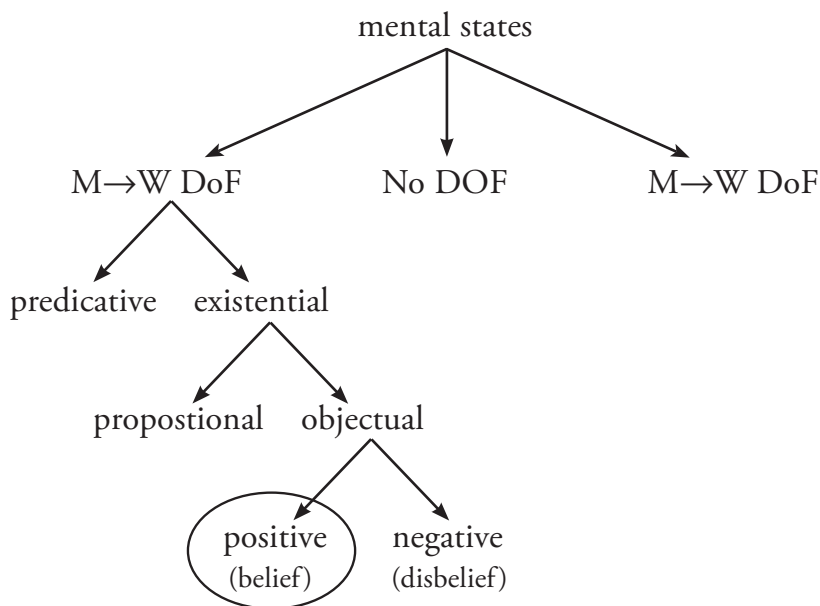


Figure 4. *A quasi-Brentanian classification*

It might be objected that perception is also a positive existential mental state with mind-to-world direction of fit, but is not a form of belief-in. A visual experience of Obama commits to Obama's existence, but does not constitute believing in Obama. Various responses to this objection are possible, but the simplest is to distinguish two subspecies of existential objectual attitude, sensory and cognitive (perceiving  $X$  and believing in  $X$ ), and say that to be is to be a fitting object of a *cognitive* positive objectual existential state with world-to-mind direction of it.

More generally, it may turn out that the present theoretical-role characterization of belief-in is incomplete, in that some other states satisfy it as well. All this would show, however, is that the theoretical role distinctive



of belief-in needs further specification. Ultimately, it is clear that there is such a thing as believing in things, and that it appears somewhere in the complete and correct classification of mental states. An exact characterization of the theoretical role of belief-in may not be trivial, but it is surely available. As long as that is the case, existence talk can be account for in terms of fittingness for belief-in. What matters for our present purposes is that belief-in is (a) psychologically real, (b) existentially committal, and (c) embodies its existence-commitment as part of its attitude, that is, in virtue of exhibiting the attitudinal property of representing-as-existent. If (a)–(c) hold, then the Brentanian approach to existence talk is viable.

#### 8. *Advantages of the fitting attitude account of existence talk*

Brentano's approach is very different from the three more standard accounts. Most importantly, for Brentano mental existence-commitment does not involve attribution of a property to anything. There is a sense in which linguistic existence-commitment does: when we assert that X exists, we implicitly attribute the property of fittingness to the belief in X, indeed X itself is attributed the property of being a suitable object for belief-in. At the same time, this is very different from the property-attribution involved in more standard account of existence talk, insofar as the properties attributed are not ostensibly ontological ones. In any case, in Brentano the parallelism between mental and linguistic existence-commitment is broken: the two look very different, though the account of the latter is derivative from that of the former.

Interestingly, Brentano's unusual approach the main pitfalls stalking the three better-known approaches discussed in §2. To be sure, there may be other solutions to these problems—the literature on this is enormous. But it is remarkable that the problems do not even *arise* for Brentano's fitting-attitude account.

The first view, existence as a substantive first-order property, raised issues with negative existentials, as well as with Hume's observation that the idea of existence 'adds nothing.' Thus, something like 'dragons have the property of not existing' seems to entail, by simple existential generalization, the incoherent-sounding 'there are things that have the property of not existing.' There may be ways around this, but the problem does not even arise in the Brentanian framework. Something like 'it is appropriate to disbelieve in dragons' does not obviously entail 'there are things such that

it is appropriate to disbelieve in them.’ For ‘appropriate to disbelieve in’ may create an intensional context, or at least a context where existential generalization is not supported.<sup>33</sup> In any case, it is clear that Brentano’s approach respects Hume’s ‘adds nothing’ observation: it is precisely because existence is not a *content* feature that there is no content difference between the ideas of a duck and of an existent duck.

The second view, existence as a second-order property, raised issues with direct-reference accounts of proper names, and more deeply recast ‘Obama exists’ as not about Obama (but about his Obamarific properties or the concept OBAMA). In contrast, there is nothing about the fitting-attitude account that requires one to take any position on how ‘Obama’ refers. When one believes in Obama, it is at Obama himself that one’s mental state is directed, not the properties or concept. For the same reason, it is clear that the account respects the intuition that ‘Obama exists’ is about Obama. It is Obama himself who is said to be a fitting object of belief-in.

The third view, existence as a formal first-order property, raised issues with the acquisition of the concept of existence. But Brentano has a straightforward account of how we acquire the concept EXISTENCE. We do not do so by interacting with existents and nonexistents, say with David Chalmers and with Alyosha Karamazov—that would overstretch the notion of interaction. Nor do we do so by interacting with property instantiations and property non-instantiations; when I see a tomato, I interact with a redness instance, but do not in addition interact with a blueness non-instance. According to Brentano, we acquire EXISTENCE by introspectively (or rather inner-perceptually) interacting with mental states that exhibit different attitudinal properties. By inner-perceiving my belief in David Chalmers and my belief in cats, as well as my disbelief in Alyosha Karamazov and my disbelief in ghosts, I interact with a variety of mental states featuring representing-as-existent and representing-as-nonexistent. I also inner-perceive my contemplation of a gold-coated jet, and the four-headed snake phantasm suddenly appearing to me, thereby interacting with the attitudinal property of mere-representing. Through

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33. Curiously, ‘it is appropriate to believe in’ does seem to support *salva veritate* substitution. Thus, the following seems valid: ‘it is appropriate to believe in Phosphorus; Phosphorus = Hesperus; therefore, it is appropriate to believe in Hesperus.’ There are other cases where an intentional verb supports existential generalization but not substitution. Consider ‘truly believes’: ‘S truly believes that *a* is F, therefore there is an *x* such that *x* is F’ seems valid, but ‘S truly believes that Phosphorus is cool, Phosphorus = Hesperus; therefore, S truly believes that Hesperus is cool’ seems invalid.

such interactions with states that represent-as-existent, represent-as-non-existent, and merely-represent I acquire the concept EXISTENCE (as well as NONEXISTENCE).<sup>34</sup>

Thus the fitting-attitude account of existence talk appears to avoid the problems facing more standard approaches. To repeat, my intention here is not to argue for the *all-things-considered superiority* of Brentano's fitting-attitude account. That would require a much more comprehensive consideration of the objections to the three other views, and of the multitudinous responses to them in the literature. My goal here has been much more modest: to *motivate* consideration of Brentano's alternative approach, as a fourth theory deserving equal attention.

At bottom, however, what motivates Brentano's fitting-attitude account of linguistic existence-commitment is not just the problems facing other views of linguistic existence-commitment. It is also Brentano's attitudinal approach to *mental* existence-commitment. If mental commitment to X's existence comes not from the mental attribution of some property, but from the attitude one mentally takes toward X, then in asserting 'X exists' we are not linguistically attributing a property either, but are commenting on the attitude it would correct or appropriate to take toward X. There is an intriguing shaping of the ontology by (descriptive) psychology here (concordantly with Brentano's general philosophical orientation): it is by attending to the subtle structures of our mental life that we can make sense of ontological discourse.<sup>35</sup>

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34. Brentano writes: 'Some philosophers have held that this concept [EXISTENCE] cannot be derived from experience. Therefore we shall have to go over this aspect of it in connection with our study of so-called innate ideas. And when we do, we will find that this concept undoubtedly is derived from experience, but from *inner* experience [i.e., inner perception], and we acquire it with reference to judgment.' (Brentano 1874, 210; italics mine) That is, we acquire the concept by inner perception that refers to (is intentionally directed at) judgments, the mental states which exhibit representing-as-existent and representing-as-nonexistent.

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