Chapter 6

Franz Brentano: The Foundation of Value Theory and Ethics

Wilhelm Baumgartner
University of Würzburg

1. Brentano's Life and Work

Franz Clemens Honoratus Hermann Brentano (1838–1917) was born into a distinguished German family of Italian origin. His second Christian name he inherited from his godfather, the famous poet Clemens Brentano. Brentano’s academic studies were centered around philosophy and theology. In 1862, he received his doctorate from Tübingen University with a dissertation entitled *Von der mannigfachen Bedeutung des Seienden nach Aristoteles* (1862; *On the Several Senses of Being in Aristotle*, 1981). He became a Catholic priest two years later, and in 1866 he received the venia legendi at Würzburg University after completing his Habilitationsschrift, *Die Psychologie des Aristoteles* (PA, 1867; *The Psychology of Aristotle*, 1977).

His teaching attracted numerous students first to Würzburg and then to Vienna. These include Carl Stumpf, the founder of the Berlin school of Gestalt psychology; Anton Marty, originator of the Prague school of linguistics; Hermann Schell, a controversial Catholic theologian, accused of “modernism”; Alexius Meinong, the founder of the Graz school of theory of objects; Thomas G. Masaryk, philosopher who became president of Czechoslovakia; Christian von Ehrenfels, famous, like Stumpf, for his principles of Gestalt psychology; Sigmund Freud, who developed his theory of the unconscious from Brentano’s theories of the conscious mind; and last but not least, Edmund Husserl, who transformed Brentano’s descriptive phenomenology into transcendental phenomenology. For Brentano, it was not sufficient merely to teach; he continually tried to stay in personal contact or at least in correspondence with his students. In doing so, he promulgated his ideas with respect to both philosophical theory and philosophical praxis in a way that can hardly be underestimated.

---

1 This chapter is dedicated to the memory of Roderick M. Chisholm (1916–1999).
There were two major critical conflicts in Brentano’s career. The first occurred in Würzburg, when he was directly involved in the controversy over papal infallibility. Brentano was asked to write a position paper about the affair for the Conference of German Bishops. In this document, he stated that infallibility contradicted the tradition of the Catholic Church, could not be justified on logical grounds, and was simply superfluous. When the dogma of infallibility was eventually proclaimed in Rome, Brentano’s position at Würzburg became untenable and he resigned in 1873 from both the priesthood and his professorial appointment. Shortly afterward, in January of 1874, he was awarded a prestigious position as a full professor at the University of Vienna. His call to Vienna was justified by the fame of his Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkte (1874; Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint [PES], 1973), by his “aptitude for ingenious and productive scholarship,” and by his “famous and impressive success” as an academic teacher.

The second radical disruption in Brentano’s life occurred in 1879. He left the Catholic Church and made plans to marry Ida Lieben. Unfortunately, it was illegal in Austria for former priests and monks to marry and to hold an official position at the same time. Brentano tried to avoid this restriction. He became a citizen of the Kingdom of Saxony and was married in Leipzig in 1880. But when he returned to Vienna, he was nevertheless forced to give up his chair at the university. Several efforts to regain his professorship failed, so once again Brentano had to obtain permission to offer lectures and seminars. As Privatdozent, he was authorized neither to direct dissertations nor to participate in academic self-government. Nevertheless, he was mentally unbroken because of his theistic optimism, and worked out his famous Deskriptive Psychologie (DP, 1982; Descriptive Psychology [DP 1995]). On its ground, he then also worked out his logic, Die Lehre vom richtigen Urteil (LU; The Theory of Correct Judgment, 1956); his ethics, Vom Ursprung sittlicher Erkenntnis (UsE, 1889; The Origin of Our Knowledge of Right and Wrong [KRW], 1902; 1969) and Grundlegung und Aufbau der Ethik (GE, 1952; The Foundation and Construction of Ethics, 1973); and his aesthetics, Grundzüge der Ästhetik (1959; Fundamentals of Aesthetics, 1959).

The other main category of investigations dealt with metaphysics: theory of knowledge or “transcendental philosophy,” as in Versuch über die Erkenntnis (Essay on Knowledge, 1925), and Philosophical Investigations on Space, Time and Continuum (1988); ontology, as in Von der mannigfachen Bedeutung des Seienden nach Aristoteles (1862; On the Several Senses of Being in Aristotle, 1975), and Kategorienlehre (1933; The Theory of Categories, 1981); and philosophical theology, as in Vom Dasein Gottes (DG, 1929; On the Existence of God, 1987). His Lectures on Metaphysics and his Correspondence will be edited by the present author.

After his wife Ida died in 1894, Brentano left Vienna, together with his son Johann Christian Michael, after writing a sort of philosophical résumé or testament: