§ 1. Preliminaries

Brentano’s theory of inner perception, evidence and truth upsets some widespread assumptions in contemporary philosophy. It rests on an unusual notion of inner perception and on a nominal theory of judgement; it attributes a central role to evidence in epistemology and treats mental states as being intrinsically true.

The present contribution aims first at presenting and elucidating some of Brentano’s views on these matters. In some crucial points Brentano’s position will be modified and hopefully enhanced in a way that is compatible with the overall picture. Considerable space will be devoted to the examination of some of the most important objections that have been or might be raised against the position presented on Brentano’s behalf. If by far not invulnerable, the position under scrutiny should hopefully appear more challenging than what it is often taken to be.

§ 2. Inner perception: immediate and infallible

Brentano is generally known for having introduced the idea of mental phenomena as being constitutively intentional, necessarily directed onto an object. He called the intentional object of a mental act its primary object and the act itself its secondary object. In the case of a perceptual act, like an act of seeing, the colour and the shape of the visually appearing object are said to be the physical phenomena, while the act itself is considered a mental phenomenon. Any act involves a reflexive consciousness of itself. It is this reflexive consciousness that Brentano called inner perception. Inner observation, instead, is a higher order consciousness where a second order act has a first order act, a mental phenomenon, as its primary object.

We are thus led to distinguish at least three levels of consciousness (cf. Bell 1990, 24). First, any object on which an act is directed is intentionally conscious, in the sense that the subject is conscious of the object through the act. Second, the act itself is consciously experienced. Finally, the very same act can become the object of an additional mental act, such that the subject is conscious of the first order mental act.

While the first and the last kind of consciousness are both intentional, there are reasonable doubts about the intentional character of the second form of consciousness, the one Brentano

1. References to the passages on which the suggested interpretation of Brentano’s position is based will be provided. The discussion of more problematic texts in Brentano’s work will have to be left for another occasion.

2. This doctrine is presented in Brentano 1924, mainly: 124-129, 176-183, 195-220. More on the evolution of Brentano’s theory of intentionality in Chudzimski 2001. The translations of the passages I shall quote in this article are mine. There are some significant differences between my translations and the translations by Rancurello, Terrell and McAlister; most prominently, I have translated “Erkenntnis” in relation to inner perception as “knowledge” rather than “cognition”.

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called inner perception. Brentano himself thought that an act could be intentionally directed on itself just as much as it is directed on any other object.

One senses, however, that consciousness of is not the sort of consciousness Brentano is looking for in the case at issue. It does not seem, at first glance, that a pain is conscious only by there being a higher order act, such as a thought, directed onto it. One does not need to think, wonder or fear that one is in pain in order to consciously experience a pain. If Brentano is looking for this sort of experiential consciousness, then, having an act reflexively directed onto itself is of little help. The problem is that intentionality does not appear to capture the nature of the form of consciousness we are inquiring into.

Among the reasons speaking against the conclusion that inner perception ought to be non-intentional, one might mention the fact that it contradicts Brentano’s thesis that all mental phenomena are intentional. The alleged contradiction would rest on a misapprehension. To say that all mental phenomena are intentional is not to say that consciousness is always intentional. Non-intentional, experiential consciousness of a mental act would not have to be an independent mental occurrence or state. It could be a property of that very act.

Brentano claimed that mental acts are necessarily given to inner perception and only contingently presented in inner observation (cf. Brentano 1924, 203). What is constitutive for a mental phenomenon, in addition to its intentional character, is its availability to inner perception, and not to inner observation. In line with this idea Brentano claimed that inner perception, but not inner observation, is bestowed with infallibility (cf. Brentano 1924, 128 and 201). We shall return to these claims below.

§ 3. The epistemic status of inner perception

Leaving aside the issue about the intentional character of inner perception, the question might be raised as to how inner perception can give rise to knowledge, let alone infallible knowledge. The claim that all mental acts are given to inner perception implies, for instance, that I cannot be in pain without being consciously in pain, albeit I might not think about it, and not even focus my attention on it. But what does that claim imply as far as my knowledge about my own pain is concerned? If, as it is often argued, one needs to believe that is in order to know that that, then I would need to believe that I am in pain in order to know that I am in pain. The belief or judgement that I am in pain appears to be a higher order mental state directed onto my pain experience. It would thus be inner observation, and not inner perception, which is required for me in order to gain knowledge about my conscious experiences. Although a constitutive trait of all mental acts, inner perception would remain epistemically inert.

Brentano thought that there is knowledge, a distinctive kind of knowledge, one can gain on the basis of inner perception. It is this sort of knowledge that he characterised as evidence. Far from presupposing it, evidence is regarded as more fundamental than belief.

Brentano’s notion of evidence depends on his conception of truth, more precisely on his rejection of the correspondence theory of truth. Let us then have a brief look at the notion of truth.

§ 4. Truth

Consider a rather common way to present the notion of truth. One might suggest, as a beginning, that truth applies to that (an utterance, a belief, a proposition, etc.), which corresponds to the world (or to some portion of it, such as a fact obtaining in the world). Truth, one might thus suggest, is defined in terms of correspondence.

There are at least two ways of interpreting such a definition. One might take it to state the meaning of the expression ‘true’ in ordinary language; or one might take it to provide a criterion for establishing whether truth obtains in some specific case.

Let us call the first the semantic conception of truth, and the latter the epistemological conception of truth. Brentano is interested in an epistemological conception of truth. He argues, however, that a definition of truth in terms of correspondence is epistemologically flawed. As many authors before and after him, he thinks that correspondence is no good criterion for truth because it generates a regression (cf. Brentano 1956, 192).

§ 5. Evidence in inner perception

Brentano argues that a specific kind of mental state is more intimately connected to truth than others. It is for a characterisation of those mental states that he introduced the expression ‘evidence’. A mental state endowed with evidence, Brentano says, “is true in itself” (Brentano 1956, 111). As examples of such mental states Brentano mentions “axioms and judgements of inner perception” (ibid.).

Leaving aside the nature of axioms, let us concentrate instead on the status of judgements of inner perception, such as the judgement that I now feel pain. It appears indeed difficult to imagine a situation where a subject would feel pain and yet sincerely judge that she does not feel any such pain. As it has often been argued, for an experience to appear painful is for it to be a pain (see, for instance, Husserl 1910, 311-312, and Kripke 1980, 151-152). Let us call the point under consideration the identity claim: in the case of (certain) mental states or occurrences, the way they appear is identical to the way they are.

There are many different ways of interpreting the real import of the claim. On the first, most straightforward interpretation, it establishes a metaphysical relation between experiences, their nature or essence, and the way they appear to us. The point would be that contrary to entities having another nature or essence, experiences, if they appear, necessarily appear the way they do.

One of the most promising alternative interpretations submits that the identity claim should be read in epistemological terms, to the effect that under certain circumstances, a subject’s having of an experience suffices alone for her to gain knowledge about that experience. This, we shall see, is what Brentano’s interpretation of the identity claim appears to be. Let us inquire into the way this result might be obtained.

§ 6. Judgements of inner perception

How should a judgement of inner perception be regarded? One might first think that it is a higher order judgement having a mental state, like a pain, as its object. Two considerations speak
against such a view. First, evidence being typically given in the case of judgements of inner perception, if such judgements were higher order acts, it would be inner observation, rather than inner perception, which carries the epistemological burden. Inner perception would remain once more epistemically inert. Second, the very idea of attributing evidence to an act of inner observation contradicts the assumption we were starting from, namely that inner observation, in opposition to inner perception, is biased and fallible.

Judgements of inner perception, then, should not be higher order mental acts. Brentano himself explicitly rejected such a view (see Brentano 1924, 196).

We still do not know, however, how judgements of inner perception should constitute knowledge at all, let alone infallible knowledge, about our own mental states, if they do not involve any higher order belief directed onto those states. In order to understand this it is necessary to recall Brentano’s theory of judgement.

§ 7. Nominal theory of judgement

There is one basic claim that characterises most theories of judgement at least since Kant. It is the claim that to judge is to synthesise, to bring terms or concepts into a specific relation to each other. This implies the idea that judging and believing have a specific content, the grasping of which presupposes a specific cognitive capacity. On such a theory, then, a judgement of inner perception could not simply accompany a mental state in order to constitute knowledge about it: it would have to involve a cognitive performance on its own to be added to the former one.

On Brentano’s theory, instead, judging and believing do not involve any restriction on the content presented to the mind. Brentano thinks that whatever is presented to the mind, for instance through perception and imagination, can as such be the content of one’s judgement. To judge a given content, he suggests, is either to accept or to reject it. The basic category of judged contents, remember, are physical and mental phenomena: ways things or experiences appear. To accept a given content is to experience the way something appears as corresponding to a way it is. To accept a presented colour, say, is to take that colour to correspond to a way something really and actually is. It would be wrong, on Brentano’s view, to equate such an acceptance with the attribution of existence to a given content, in the way we are said to attribute a predicate to a subject (cf. Brentano 1924, 200-201). Rather, we ought to think of acceptance as a character the content acquires when it is experienced as real and actual. A judgement of inner perception, then, is “simply the acceptance of the mental phenomena presented in inner perception” (Brentano 1874, 201). In a judgement of inner perception one accepts, for instance, a sensation of heat as really and actually exemplified by one’s occurring haptic experience, as opposed, say, to its being fictional or merely possible.

§ 8. Judgements of inner perception and cognitive responsiveness

Let us now return to our case of judgements of inner perception. The question was: how can a mental phenomenon be accepted in a judgement without there being a further mental act of judging directed onto it? In the light of Brentano’s theory of judgement we are led to compare this case with the case of a sensation experienced as pleasant. One does not need a further act
directed onto the sensation for it to be pleasant, although one certainly needs to have a certain faculty, some sort of emotional responsiveness, in order to experience a sensation as pleasant. Pleasantness, it seems, is a qualitative character a sensation can acquire if an emotionally responsive subject experiences it. Similarly, we should now argue, one does not need a special act directed onto a presentation for the presentation to be accepted, although one needs a certain faculty, some sort of cognitive responsiveness, in order to accept or reject a presentation. Acceptance and rejection are characters a presentation can acquire when experienced by a cognitively responsive subject.

To be accepted is not to be the object of an act, but to acquire a certain character. Not only mental acts can have that character, any accepted content has it. Brentano, however, thinks that mental phenomena have the acceptance character \textit{by necessity}. One can see why he was led to think so: if there is no room for a distinction between the sort of consciousness that is provided through inner perception and a \textit{judgement} of inner perception, then one cannot go through an experience without that experience being accepted. For, remember, all experiences are accompanied by inner perception. The notion of cognitive responsiveness, in contrast, offers room for a more articulated view on this matter. There might be conditions under which the subject is not cognitively responsive to an experience just as much as there are conditions under which a subject is not emotionally responsive to a sensation. The very same sensation that was unpleasant in certain circumstances can go unnoticed as the subject gets caught in an absorbing activity. Attention being driven to another object, the sensation itself has no emotional character. Similar phenomena ought to be expected at the cognitive level. A mental phenomenon, just as much as any other content, might occur without the subject presenting any cognitive reaction to it.

§ 9. Evidence and intrinsic truth

To judge, we have learned, is to experience a content with the character of acceptance. Under certain epistemic conditions a true judgement constitutes knowledge. In the case of mental acts, of Brentano’s mental phenomena, their acceptance necessarily constitutes knowledge. This is why Brentano is in a position to claim that judgements of inner perception are evident. Let me explain.

A judgement concerning a physical phenomenon might be false. A subject can erroneously take an imagined colour or an imagined shape to be exemplified in the external world. A subject might also see something without judging that she is doing so. She might remain cognitively passive with respect to her act of seeing. If, however, she accepts her experience in a judgement of inner perception, her judgement cannot go wrong. For in such a case the experience itself acquires the character of acceptance. One cannot cognitively respond to an experience that does not occur. And one cannot reject an occurring experience in a judgement of inner perception. For in the light of what we have seen, this would mean to experience an occurring act as being neither real nor actual. It would mean, e.g., to experience pain as not being exemplified by any occurring experience. Judgements of inner perceptions are evident in so far as a subject’s cognitive response to her own experiences must necessarily yield a true judgement. This, of course, does not mean that the mere presence of the experiences suffices to guarantee the generation of judgements, and \textit{a fortiori} of necessarily true judgements. But judgements of inner perception being \textit{necessarily} true, they do not need anything more than their truth in order to constitute
knowledge. This is the sense in which one might claim on Brentano’s behalf that there is no possibility for a subject to make a true, and yet unjustified judgement of inner perception.

An experience does not necessarily have a cognitive character. It might either occur in a cognitively unresponsive subject, or in circumstances where the subject’s responsiveness is partially or entirely preempted. When the subject cognitively reacts to the experience, however, the experience itself acquires the character of acceptance. It is experienced as real and actual. There are not two items to count here: the experience on the one hand, and its acceptance on the other. It is the experience itself that makes the judgement true. Therefore, Brentano can say that in such a case, the experience is “true in itself”. Truth is an intrinsic property of accepted experiences.

An accepted mental act is evident without being the object of a further higher order act, such as a belief. Evidence does not presuppose any higher order judgement or belief.

§ 10. Objections and replies

There are several objections that can be and have been raised against Brentano’s conception of evidence, against his theory of truth, against his notion of inner perception, and against his theory of judgement. What follows is not aimed at rebutting all such objections. It might be instructive, however, to mention some objections and to describe the most natural way Brentano would, could or should reply to them.

§ 10.1. The difference between judgements of inner perception and judgements of inner observation

Let us start with some remarks that challenge the internal coherence of Brentano’s theory. One might wonder, to start with, how judgements of inner observation are to be analysed in opposition to judgements of inner perception. They too are directed onto mental states, so, one might think, they too ought to be evident. This, however, would be in contradiction to Brentano’s own view, and it would make it impossible for a subject to have any false belief about her own mental states, which is bizarre.

Brentano’s answer to this objection would be clear: in inner observation the observed mental act is not experienced as such. Consider an example. Suppose the subject judges on the basis of her recollection that she had a pain in her leg yesterday. The subject has an experience of remembering directed onto yesterday’s pain. She is not experiencing the pain any more, although for her to remember it, the pain must somehow be presented in memory. The pain is the object of the act of remembering and the acceptance is a character of the way the pain is presented in memory. This being so, the judgement is fallible. Indeed, the subject might mistakenly accept as a past experience a pain she is presently imagining.

One might insist on the fact that the only difference between a judgement of recollection and a judgement of inner perception lies in the temporal relation to the accepted content. If one cognitively reacts to a presently experienced pain, say, one is said to accept the pain as present; by analogy, if one accepts a pain on the basis of recollection, one should be said to accept the pain as past. If this is what the difference between accepting a pain in inner perception and in recollection boils down to, however, it is difficult to see why the former should be evident and the latter not.
Acceptance, we said, is a feature any content can acquire when presented to a cognitively responsive subject. In judging, for instance, one may accept the content of one’s perceptual experience. By analogy, one can say that when a subject accepts an experience in inner perception, she experiences her experience as exemplifying the properties that constitute it: the subject experiences the painful feeling, say, as exemplified by her present experience. This, of course, is a very cumbersome way to say that she really and actually feels pain (as opposed to imagining or simulating pain). But consider now the case of the acceptance of a remembered pain. One might say that the subject experiences the painful feeling as exemplified by her past experience. This, however, would not mean that she presently really and actually feels pain. It obviously remains open to determine what exactly it means to remember pain, to experience the painful feeling as exemplified by a past experience. But whatever that means, it cannot mean the same as to really and actually feel pain. This being so, the distinction between accepting an experience given in inner perception and accepting a remembered experience remains unharmed.

§ 10.2. Expressibility of judgements of inner perception

Judgements of inner perception, it might be conjectured, appear to be ineffable. Indeed, if a subject utters a sentence of the form “I now feel pain”, she would naturally be taken to express a higher order judgement concerning her first order state of pain. Or, to put it in less controversial terms, in order to express the second order belief that she feels pain, the subject would naturally tend to utter a sentence of the form mentioned above. How then should she express her judgement of inner perception concerning her state of pain?

The case of pain is notoriously complex because of the question as to what exactly its intentional object ought to be. In order to avoid this debate, which does not contribute to a clarification of our question, we might concentrate on another case, the case of perception. Consider a subject having a visual experience of something appearing red to her. In so far as she is cognitively responsive, she might accept the red appearance, she might experience red as really and actually there, in the external world. How would the subject express this judgement? She might express it by an utterance like “something is red”, or “something red exists”. Such utterances, however, suggest that the subject applies a concept, the concept red, on the basis of her perceptual experience. This is not the best way to express the simple acceptance of a perceptual content. More precisely: for a subject to accept a perceptual content, a physical phenomenon in Brentano’s terms, possession of the corresponding concept would not have to be required. For, nothing so far has been said in favour of the claim that judgements necessarily have conceptual content. On the contrary, if one follows Brentano in claiming that any content can be the object of one’s judgemental acceptance, judgements with no conceptual content ought to be allowed.

In judgements of inner perception the subject accepts a mental, not a physical phenomenon. She accepts, suppose, her seeing red, as opposed to the redness that visually appears to her. Again, for her to accept her visual experience it should not be required that she possesses the relevant psychological concept. It would thus be misleading for her to express her judgement of inner perception by an utterance like: “I am now seeing”, although she might, on the basis of her judgement of inner perception, form a conceptualised belief she would properly express by making that utterance. Indeed, it should not be a problem for Brentano to allow for conceptual judgments to be verbally expressed. To claim that experiential content can be accepted in judgement does not imply that conceptual content cannot.
What should we then say about the alleged ineffability of the mere acceptance of a physical or mental phenomenon? A position one might initially find tempting would submit that a subject could manifest a judgement of inner perception in a more primitive way than by the use of sophisticated linguistic means. The acceptance of a pain might be manifested by an unarticulated vocal expression (e.g. by crying) or by some typical verbal substitute of it. Although cases like the latter are possible, important considerations speak against the idea that acceptance is typically manifested in that way. First, if it might appear natural to think of the acceptance of a pain as yielding some vocal manifestations, it is much less obvious that the acceptance of a visual experience should do so. And the theory becomes utterly bizarre when it comes to the acceptance of physical phenomena, such as perceptual contents. How does one typically manifest one’s acceptance of redness or squareness? It is finally and most importantly hard to see why an unarticulated vocal manifestation should be the consequence of the acceptance of a specific content, as opposed to its mere presentation. The imagination of a pain might cause one weep just as much as its real occurrence. On closer scrutiny, then, no correlation appears to hold between the acceptance of experiential content and the production of any primitive vocal or verbal expressions.

It is thus reasonable to acknowledge that judgements of inner perception cannot be expressed from the first person point of view. There is nothing mysterious or particularly deep behind this fact, just as much as there isn’t anything mysterious behind the common claim that perceptions are ineffable from the first person point of view. It is a simple consequence of the fact that experiences require conceptualisation for them to be verbally expressed. This, of course, does not impinge on the question as to whether a subject’s experiences, a fortiori her judgements of inner perception, can be described from a third person’s point of view. Nothing up to here speaks against the claim that one might truly say of somebody else that she accepts her visual experiences, or, in a slightly more intuitive way, that her visual experience exists for her. Similar attributions pertain to the acceptance of a physical phenomenon. One might truly say of somebody that redness exists now for him.

§ 10.3. Conceptual content and cognitive responsiveness

One might yet voice a qualm about Brentano’s notion of acceptance as an analysis of judgement. One might suspect that allowing judgements to have non-conceptual content makes it impossible to distinguish between the fact that a pain, say, appears painful to the subject and the fact that the subject judges that she has a pain. This, it might be stressed, contradicts the concession made above that it ought to be psychologically possible for a subject to experience pain as pain without judging that she is in pain (for instance, when the subject does not possess the concept pain).

The mentioned effect of the distinction between a subject applying the concept pain and a subject not applying it can be obtained with the distinction between a subject cognitively responding to a presentation and a subject unable to manifest that sort of responsiveness. Indeed, it is often argued that the application of sensorial concepts, such as <green>, <round> or <pain>, presupposes the capacity to distinguish appearance from reality. Application of the concept <square> involves grasp of the fact that something might appear square without being square. Cognitive responsiveness corresponds precisely to this general capacity to distinguish appearance from reality. It should therefore be possible for a subject who is not cognitively
responsive to experience a pain as painful without accepting it. That alone, of course, does not mean that the subject would have any reason that would, were she cognitively responsive, justify her rejection of the pain.

§ 10.4. Negation and judgement

A fourth possible objection would be directed against Brentano’s nominal theory of judgement. This theory has been widely rejected. Indeed, it is often argued that authors such as Frege, Husserl, Meinong, Wittgenstein and Russell, have all introduced a special ontological category, the category of thoughts, states of affairs or facts, in order to satisfy the requirement that belief and judgement need a special, propositional content. One of the most pressing arguments in this context is that by admitting two kinds of judgement, acceptance and rejection, Brentano would have erroneously situated negation at the level of the attitude instead of leaving it at the level of content. Negation applies to propositions, not to objects, events or mental acts. Frege, for instance, argues that one does not accept or reject the thought that \( p \), one simply judges that \( p \) or judges that \( \neg p \) (cf. Frege 1918/19, 152-153). We have one type of mental act with contradictory contents and not opposing acts with one and the same content. Given that Brentano’s notion of evidence rests on his theory of judgement and that the latter’s premises are unsound, Brentano’s theory of evidence, one might conclude, was doomed to fail.

Whatever else this argument would consent to conclude, it is not obvious that the mistake Brentano is said to have made with respect to negation carries over to his notion of evidence. All Brentano really needs in this context for his notion of evidence to be coherent, is that acceptance be a character a mental act can acquire in being experienced by a cognitively responsive subject rather than by being the object of a higher order mental act directed onto it. This is independent of the question as to whether it is reasonable to contrast acceptance and rejection of one and the same content as opposed to contrasting the acceptance of a determinate content to the acceptance of its negation.

§ 10.5. Intrinsically true mental states

We saw above that a mental state can be intrinsically true, in the sense that its being true only depends on its being accepted. So, for instance, an accepted pain is intrinsically true in so far as the pain makes itself true. One might insist that what is true is not the plain pain, but the accepted pain, or the acceptance of the pain. Consider the following analogy. Suppose a horse needs to be running in order for it to jump over a certain hurdle. What is jumping over the hurdle: the horse, the running horse or the running of the horse? The analogy is limping in one important point: the running of the horse, as an event, can hardly jump, but the acceptance of the pain, as a mental state, might well be true. This being said, it should be clear from what we saw so far that what is true, in the case of a judgement of inner perception, is not a mental state different from the pain. One might say that it is the acceptance, as a dependent part of the pain, which is true. This is correct as long as it does not conceal the difference between the case of the accepted pain which is made true by the pain itself from the case of the accepted red which is not made true by the accepted visual appearance itself. It is this difference the notion of intrinsic truth is meant to capture.
Notice, by the way, that not all entities are possible contents of Brentano’s acceptances: chairs, dogs and the moon are neither mental nor physical phenomena, and can thus not be true, neither intrinsically nor extrinsically.

§ 10.6. Cognitive responsiveness and dispositional belief

A deep worry might question the status of cognitive responsiveness. It has been introduced as a disposition a subject might possess, and when possessing it, a disposition a subject might exercise. Apart from well-known qualms about the general status of dispositions, one might wonder whether cognitive responsiveness really ought to be understood as a disposition rather than as a state. Why not consider acceptance in Brentano’s view as corresponding to the beginning of a belief a subject acquires when she experiences a presented content as actual and real?

Beliefs, as opposed to judgements, are often considered to be dispositional. To believe that \( p \) is to be disposed to judge that \( p \) under certain circumstances. There is some uncertainty about how exactly a subject acquires a dispositional belief, but one generally allows for the belief to be acquired through a judgement. In that case judging that \( p \) is the beginning of the disposition to believe that \( p \). If this is the view, then one might indeed be tempted to establish a connection between cognitive responsiveness and belief. The details are important, however. First, if beliefs are dispositions and if different beliefs correspond to different dispositions, then cognitive responsiveness is not a belief: there are not different kinds of cognitive responsiveness corresponding to the different contents one may accept in judgement. One might rather say that cognitive responsiveness is the species of faculty that has its kinds in the different dispositional beliefs. Second, and more importantly, one should pay attention to keep the first order dispositional belief acquired through the judgement separate from the further higher order belief, possibly acquired through a higher order judgement. So, for instance, if one says that by accepting the pain she feels, the subject acquires the belief that she feels pain, this should not be intended to imply that the subject has acquired a second order state intentionally directed onto the first order pain. The picture would rather be that by virtue of the subject’s cognitive responsiveness the felt pain has acquired a new, cognitive dimension.  

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4. I would like to thank Davor Bodrozic, Johannes Brandl, Fabian Dorsch, Geert Keil, Johann Marek, Maria Reicher and Mark Textor for helpful comments.


