

# Brentano on Self-Knowledge

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Self-knowledge is first-personal knowledge about oneself, that is, knowledge about oneself that is typically expressed by usage of the first-person pronoun. It is sometimes distinguished from self-awareness, self-consciousness, and the feeling of self (Gertler 2011, 1–2). These terminological distinctions are not always used consistently, in part because similar terms have different meanings in various languages.<sup>i</sup> Brentano occasionally talks about *Selbstbewusstsein* (self-knowledge) and *Selbsterkenntnis* (cognition of self), but more often he uses *inneres Bewusstsein* (inner consciousness) and *innere Wahrnehmung* (inner perception) to speak about one's awareness of one's own mental acts. He thinks that every mental act “includes within it a consciousness of itself” (Brentano 1973a: 153) which is both an inner perception and a “cognition of the act” (1973a: 154). In other places, he speaks of *Selbstbewusstsein* as “knowledge about the substance which has that knowledge as a property” (1933: 153\*; see also 1928: 6; 1981a: 116).<sup>ii</sup> Thus Brentano discusses both inner perception and self-knowledge. The two are related but not identical, and this article explains what they mean and how they are related in Brentano's philosophy.

What follows starts with an overview of four central philosophical questions connected to self-knowledge and a brief description of two traditions that have influenced the debate about self-knowledge. This sets the background against which Brentano's position will be presented and evaluated. Brentano's conception of self-knowledge will then be presented, situated with respect to the

four questions and the historical background, and evaluated. It will appear that inner perception plays a central role in Brentano's conception of self-knowledge.

Four questions stand at the core of philosophical theories of self-knowledge. There is first a question about the nature of *de se* knowledge, first-personal knowledge about oneself. What is the feature in virtue of which such knowledge is distinguished from third-personal knowledge about oneself? A second question concerns the asymmetry between first-personal and third-personal knowledge about one's own conscious states and experiences. I normally know what I think, feel and desire in a way you don't. What is distinctive of the first-personal access to one's own conscious life, and what features characterize such knowledge? There is further a question about the metaphysical import of self-knowledge. What exactly is this self of which we have knowledge *de se*, and which has properties we access in a way that is not open from the third-person perspective? Is it a material object, a body like many others, or some other sort of entity? There is finally a whole set of rather fundamental questions about the relation between self-knowledge and rational self-determination. When I seem to wonder what I believe, or what I desire, do I not in fact wonder what I *should* believe, or what I should desire, given the circumstances in which I find myself? To know what I should believe and desire is not to find something out about me. It is rather a way of making up my mind.

Two traditions have dominated the debate about self-knowledge in western philosophy. The first, which has its modern roots in Descartes, has concentrated on knowledge about one's conscious life. The second, which moves from Kant, has insisted on the nature of knowledge *de se*, knowledge about oneself *as a subject*. Descartes is famous for the idea that knowledge about our own thinking is indubitable and infallible (Descartes 1996). From there he moved to the conclusion that the self cannot be a material object, that it must be a mental substance. Kant thought that genuine *de se* knowledge is not simply knowledge about one's conscious life: it must also be knowledge about the subject *qua* subject. Since he believed, however, that we can only know ourselves as objects, he concluded that although we experience ourselves as subjects when we think, we never really know ourselves as such (Kant 1998: B157ff.).

Brentano's notion of inner perception speaks to the Cartesian tradition (it is perception of one's *conscious acts*), while his notion of self-knowledge speaks to the Kantian tradition (it is knowledge of *oneself*). Both Descartes and Kant thought that self-knowledge plays a pivotal role in our understanding of human knowledge. But one finds in both the Cartesian and the Kantian traditions philosophers who rejected such a role. Hume, for instance, who would not accept Descartes' conclusion about the ontology of the self, was persuaded that there is no knowledge about the self in addition to knowledge about one's individual experiences (Hume 1978: I.iv.6). Wittgenstein maintained that knowledge about oneself as a subject really boils down to identification-free knowledge about oneself (Wittgenstein 1958: 66-67; see also Shoemaker 1968 and Evans 1982).

At the beginning of his *Psychology*, Brentano suggests that psychology is best defined as concerned with mental phenomena, and not with the soul, because according to some "there is no such thing as a soul" (1973a: 8). Their argument is that in inner perception "we encounter appearances of thinking, feeling and willing," but "we do not notice anything of which they are properties. Such a thing," they conclude, "is a fiction" (*ibid.*\*; see also 1982: 10). If the soul, as bearer of mental properties, is a fiction, then one might expect that the self, understood as a subject rather than as a bundle of those experiences, is just as spurious. And if there is no special self to know, then one might wonder what self-knowledge could possibly be over and above knowledge of one's own mental acts. Although Brentano does not endorse this line of thought, he adopts a conception of psychology compatible with it in order to preserve theoretical neutrality at the outset (see CHAP. 3).

In a later text, nonetheless, Brentano stipulates that "self-knowledge (*Selbstbewusstsein*) is knowledge about the substance which has that knowledge as a property" (1981a: 116). He states that "one and the same mental substance must underlie all mental activities..." and that "this substance, insofar as it has consciousness of itself, is what we call our self or *I*" (*ibid.*: 121\*). He argues that the self is given in inner perception with "immediate evidence" (*ibid.*). He airs the Cartesian rhyme that the self is given "as a mental substance" (*ibid.*: 120), a "thinking soul" (1925: 162), but rejects the idea that it appears unextended

(1981a: 192). He concedes that a person feeling a pain may “not distinguish the substance, which here feels pain, from the accident by means of which the substance appears to him” (1981a: 117; 1925: 162). The thinking substance, however, can be “brought to awareness as a result of the frequent change of its accidents.... One then grasps this substance as that which permanently underlies this change and which gives unity to its manifold character” (*ibid.*). Animals may never reach the capacity to make such a distinction (*ibid.*). We humans are entitled to the belief that in inner perception we access one and the same self, because “nothing can be perceived with immediate evidence, which is not identical to the perceiver” (Brentano 1928: 98). Even so, nothing one knows about one’s own self by inner perception suffices to individuate oneself as opposed to somebody else: “we can imagine without contradiction that another being has the very same determination as the being that we perceive” (1928: 82; 1981a: 121). Brentano is finally aware of the fact that the kind of self-knowledge he is dealing with is supposed to be “self-knowledge *per se*,” which he distinguishes from “self-knowledge *per accidens*” (Brentano 1981a\*: 123-124), that is, knowledge about oneself in the third person.

Brentano’s conception of self-knowledge explicitly addresses three of the four questions about the nature of self-knowledge mentioned above. There is first the metaphysical claim that the self is a mental substance, the unifying and unique bearer of mental activities. There is second the contention that there is a special, first-personal route to this kind of knowledge that is provided by inner perception, which is exclusively first-personal infallible knowledge of one’s own experiences. And there is finally the explicit assumption that knowledge obtained through inner perception qualifies for self-knowledge *de se*. The general view is that one has *de se* knowledge about oneself in so far as one knows oneself as the bearer of one’s own experiences on the basis of a special kind of access, called inner perception. So the view is that inner perception is a route to *de se* self-knowledge by virtue of some of its epistemic features. By attributing a special role to inner perception, Brentano stands firmly in the Cartesian tradition. By recognising the need to explain the nature of knowledge *de se*, he acknowledges a requirement that characterises the Kantian tradition. Brentano

did not explicitly discuss the relation between self-knowledge and self-determination. Some interpretations make room for considerations that are relevant in this respect. I shall briefly mention them at the end.

Let us then discuss the three central claims of Brentano's theory of self-knowledge. I shall start with some remarks about the ontology of the self. I shall then concentrate on Brentano's theory of inner perception. I shall present the theory and assess its potential in answering questions concerning the *de se* character of self-knowledge. Some interpretations will be mentioned at the end in order to indicate possible enhancements.

Issues related to the ontology of the self are part of a general account of Brentano's ontology. A few remarks will have to suffice (for more see CHAP. 14-17). At the time of his *Psychology* (1874), Brentano takes the self to be a unified whole. It is not a mere collective, as Hume thought, but it *is* complex, insofar as simultaneous psychic acts are 'divisives', i.e. parts of a whole that cannot exist by themselves (see CHAP. 17). Brentano later thinks that the self must be simple, since two persons don't exchange their identities just by changing "all their sensations, judgments, and emotions" (1981a: 118).

Inner perception is supposed to provide access to the self, an access that qualifies for self-knowledge *de se*. We need to rehearse Brentano's doctrine of inner perception in order to evaluate this contention (for more, see CHAP. 5). Five ideas stand at the core of Brentano's doctrine. First, "every mental act has a double object, a primary and a secondary object" (1973a: 153). The primary object of an act of hearing, for instance, is a sound; the secondary object is the act itself (1973a: 128). Inner perception is the awareness of the secondary object. There are not two acts involved. The act and its inner perception "form a single mental phenomenon" (1973a: 98, 100, 107), they stand in a relation of "fusion" (1973a: 100, 107). Second, inner perception involves a judgement. This consists in the "simple affirmation (*Anerkennung*) of the mental phenomenon" (1973a: 110). When I imagine Zeus, I represent the Greek god and affirm, or rather acknowledge, my act of imagining it. Third, the judgement of inner perception constitutes unmotivated, immediately self-evident, indubitable, and infallible

knowledge of the act itself (1973a: 26, 70, 97, 107, 111). It is immediate and unmotivated because having the act suffices for knowing it: no need for any further justification, nor for a reason to believe that I have it. It is infallible and indubitable because the judgement is a constitutive part of the act itself. Further, inner perception, which is constitutive of each act, has to be distinguished from inner observation, which involves an additional act, as when one remembers one's past experiences. Inner observation involves attention, noticing, and focussing; inner perception does not. Indeed, at one point Brentano states that "we can *never* focus our attention upon the object of inner perception" (1973a: 22). Fifth, and relatedly, inner perception is confused (1973a: 216), in the sense that we do not distinguish all the elements we inner-perceive in a single episode, and it may lead to mistakes concerning its content (1928: 16, 20). This doesn't prevent it from being self-evident and infallible. The fact that one has a false belief concerning the content of one's inner perception does not show that inner perception *itself* is deceptive (*ibid.*).

In what sense does inner perception deliver self-knowledge and what kind of self-knowledge do we obtain from it? In a first, rather immediate sense, inner perception delivers self-knowledge, or rather reflexive knowledge, by virtue of the fact that each mental act represents itself, in addition to some external object. Three features characterize this kind of reflexivity. First, it is compatible with a Humean metaphysics of the self. No subject is needed, to whom the experience would be given as her own, in addition to a bundle of self-referential experiences. Second, it is insufficient for an account of self-knowledge of a more substantial self, as the one Brentano came to accept later in his career. If the self is a substance, and experiences are its attributes, then the self does not come to know itself simply by virtue of the fact that its experiences refer to themselves. Even if, as a matter of fact, all the experiences belong to one and the same enduring substance, the fact that each experience represents itself does not entitle the subject to attribute the experience to herself. Third, this kind of reflexive knowledge does not qualify as self-knowledge *de se*. For an act to represent itself it is not required that it does so in 'the first person'. First-

personal representations need to be reflexive, but not all reflexive representations are first-personal.

Brentano did not share Hume's conception of the self, and he intended his account to meet the *de se* requirement. That is, he intended it as an account of self-knowledge as conceived in the Kantian tradition, not just as conceived in the Cartesian tradition. What further resources, in addition to the reflexivity of the act, can one find in Brentano's doctrine of inner perception in order to meet these ambitions? Brentano's claim that "nothing can be perceived with immediate evidence, which is not identical to the perceiver" (Brentano 1928: 98) could be meant to address the second remark made above. The argument might be this: (1) each act represents itself, so its content provides not only (indirect) justification for the existence of the object it is about, but also (immediate) justification for its own existence; (2) inner perception is immediately self-evident; (3) somebody else's experiences cannot be given with immediate self-evidence; therefore, (4) a subject is entitled to attribute the experience to herself.

This argument has its drawbacks. First, the entitlement ought to be external in the sense that it cannot plausibly require the subject to entertain the second and third premises, which articulate sophisticated intellectual insights. It is not clear that such an external entitlement corresponds to the kind of self-knowledge Brentano had in mind. Second, and for related reasons, the entitlement does not suffice for *de se* knowledge. Although I obtain an immediate justification for believing that there is an experience simply by having it, and although this justification can be immediate only if the experience is indeed mine, this alone does not suffice for me to be justified in believing that *I* have the experience. It should further appear to me that the experience is mine. Third, the argument depends on the acceptance of the idea that experiences are immediately self-evident. Philosophers worried about avoiding the myth of the given often find the idea of immediate justification awkward, especially if it is associated, as in Brentano's case, with infallibility. An account of self-knowledge should preferably not depend on the acceptance of this form of immediate justification.

Brentano's doctrine has inspired many philosophers interested in consciousness and self-knowledge. Ever since the publication of Brentano's views, influential philosophers have dealt with it, with more or less critical purposes (e.g. Husserl 1970: 81ff). More recently, a number of authors have suggested various modifications, some of which could be used to handle the difficulties mentioned above. Thomasson has suggested that inner perception should not be considered a transitive form of 'awareness of', but rather as a case of a mental state "having a phenomenological character" (Thomasson 2000: 204). This conception would make the infallibility claim needless, since inner perception would not involve any representation that could possibly misrepresent anything (Thomasson 2000: 206). Kriegel agrees that inner perception is not 'representation of': he suggests instead that we should read it as meaning representation *to*. "When I consciously think of the Sydney Opera House, I am in an internal state," he submits, "that instantiates two representation relations: it bears a representation-of relation to the Opera House and a representation-to relation to me" (Kriegel 2013: 25). This appears to satisfy the *de se* requirement. Brandl has provided textual evidence in favour of the claim that the distinction between inner perception and inner observation is about degrees of distinctness: "when this degree is high, we can focus on our experiences as primary objects, when it is low, we can only be aware of them as secondary objects" (Brandl 2013: 62). This line of reasoning could be used in order to consider inner perception as a state that finds in articulated self-knowledge its proper expression. When you judge that you are experiencing something, you don't inform me about what you found out about yourself, but you explicitly articulate, and make up your mind about, the way the world seems to you. This could be the beginning of a conception concerning the relation between self-knowledge and self-determination that is inspired by Brentano's theory of inner consciousness.

## References

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<sup>i</sup> In German "Selbstbewusstsein" (literally: self-consciousness) is often used as a general term, covering "Selbstgefühl" (feeling of self), "Selbstwahrnehmung" (self-awareness), "Selbsterkenntnis" (cognition of oneself) and "Selbstwissen" (self-knowledge). Note: the verb "wissen" requires a that-clause in German, whereas "kennen" does not. On some occasions "kennen" can be translated by "being acquainted with," but in most cases one can safely use the verb "to know." For Brentano's 'classical' notion of knowledge see Brentano 1925: 159.

<sup>ii</sup> The asterisk indicates that I have translated or modified the translation.