



CONCERNING CONSCIOUSNESS, WITH REFERENCE TO FRANZ BRENTANO

Posted on December 1, 2022 by Alberto Buela



With modernity a Copernican turn occurs in philosophy, as Kant observes, and the metaphysics that until then started from the question of the entity as entity, now starts from the subject. It is thus transformed into a metaphysics of subjectivity, as Heidegger rightly noted.

This metaphysics that is born from Descartes' *ego cogito* has a second stage that is inaugurated with the detailed analysis of consciousness. And the first to study it in itself and in detail was Franz Brentano from 1860-1870, until he finally published his *The Classification of Mental Phenomena (Von der Klassifikation der psychischen Phänomene)* in 1911.

Let us begin with Brentano, a German philosopher of Italian origin who taught in Vienna. José Gaos, a Spaniard living in Mexico, who was Brentano's first translator of [*Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*](#) (1874), affirmed that Brentano was a heteroclit philosopher; that is, he departed from the ordinary rules of what a philosopher should do or say. Thus, Brentano had as disciples and students important figures, such as Edmund Husserl, Sigmund Freud, Christian von Ehrenfels, Alexius Meinong, Carl Stumpf, Kazimierz Twardowski, Anton Marty and many others—who excelled in phenomenology, psychoanalysis, Gestalt theory, object theory, language theory, logical positivism, symbolic logic, value theory, etc. Moreover, behind the Vienna Circle and the great contemporary studies on Aristotle (Jaeger, Ross, Owens, Zürcher, Aubenque) is the figure of the philosopher Marienberg.

But then why has Brentano not been studied in the universities as his contemporaries have, such as Stuart Mill, Nietzsche, Frege, Dilthey? Because Brentano subjected Kant to a merciless and severe criticism. He called Kant prejudiced by his *a priori*. He called him ignorant of the history of philosophy and mathematics. And this was not forgiven by the German universities and thereafter by the rest of the universities. Thus, it was that the Catholic universities, where scholastic philosophy is taught, ignored him thoroughly, even though Brentano was an excellent connoisseur of Thomas Aquinas whom he quoted assiduously and knew to perfection. . All this explains why Brentano has never been studied. And if he is mentioned in the faculties of philosophy, it is only in relation to the intentionality of consciousness when Husserl and phenomenology are taught.

Let us now turn to the subject at hand.

There are at least two terms to speak of consciousness: consciousness and conscience. The first is closer to its Latin roots and indicates the capacity of the human being to know and perceive reality. And

the second, which is in common use, indicates rather a knowledge of what is right or wrong. The former translates the German word *Bewusstsein*, which alludes to our capacity to have psychic phenomena and to realize that we have them and which refers to that special capacity we human beings have—often manifested in the form of an inner voice—to know what we should do and what we should not do.

Both terms are limited to the phenomena of knowledge in such a way that they do not contribute much to the study of consciousness itself or whatever its meaning may be. Brentano [makes his contribution](#): "I prefer to use the word consciousness as equivalent to psychic phenomenon or *psychic act*." Thus, psychic phenomena are those to which something is inherent. Consciousness is always "consciousness of." As the great Spanish philosopher Xavier Zubiri maintained in his thesis on Husserl in 1921: "Brentano discovered that things are something independent of experience but consciousness is not something empty."

The experience of psychic phenomena that are the constitutive of human consciousness and of which the rest of reality is the object or intentional correlate are lived as immediate and original evidence. And these phenomena are true in themselves: "as they appear to be, so they are in reality; a fact attested by the experience through which they are perceived." That is to say that each psychic act is lived as such before any conceptualization. This way of living the psychic is the true way of experiencing the real. And consciousness lives and experiences it at the same time, representatively, judicatively and affectively. Internal perception is infallible and there can never exist in us a psychic phenomenon of which we have [no representation](#).

Thus, consciousness as a psychic act is composed of three fundamental kinds of psychic activities: representation, judgment and emotion, interest or love. If psychology, psychoanalysis and psychiatry are clear about this Brentanian liminal distinction, which he traces back to Descartes and J.S. Mill, they will advance on a sure step, otherwise they will get lost in a thousand confusing and sterile subtleties. Or worse, be harmful.

In representing, something always appears to us. Thus, when we see something, a color appears to us; when we hear something, we represent a sound; when we imagine something, a product of the imagination, and so on. The purpose of names is to arouse representations: "[We understand by representation](#) not what is represented but the representing. This representing constitutes not only the

foundation of judging, but also of craving and willing."

Those representations, when we accept them as true or reject them as false, bring about the judging. And although representing and judging are phenomena of thinking, judgment cannot be reduced to simple representations or combinations of these. If I say "mountain of gold," I express a representation; and as long as I do no more than that, I express no judgment.

As for the emotions or phenomena of love or interest, they comprise the phenomena that affect our appetite or will. And so, every judgment takes an object to be true or false, every emotion takes an object to be good or bad.

Basically, all three are different modes of reference of the consciousness to the object. The difference between them is that the intentional mode in judgment is to admit if it is true, or reject if it is false, while the intentional mode of reference in the emotions is to like or dislike.

Whereas in representing (the term best expresses the psychic act of representation) there can be no analogy, for I can represent to myself black or white, but I cannot represent to myself, for example, black or white in two opposite ways.

The internal experience of consciousness immediately shows the difference in the content of the three primary psychic activities.

It should be clarified that every psychic act is conscious because it gives itself a consciousness of itself; but at the same time it has a consciousness according to three modes: the representation of it, the knowledge of it and the feeling towards it. "[Every psychic act](#), even the simplest, has a fourfold aspect from which it can be considered." Thus, we can distinguish, even though the psychic phenomenon is unitary, a primary object (e.g., sound, the act in which we hear), and a secondary object (the phenomenon in which the sound is heard). The object of consciousness is only represented in the first place; knowledge constitutes a second moment, the same as feeling or interest because "[representations are also](#) the foundation of craving and feeling."

Just as the content of a judgment insofar as it is true is admissible and as false rejectable, in the same way, in the case of feeling and liking, of sentiment and will, the good is pleasant and the bad

unpleasant: "[It is about](#) the value or disvalue of an object."

All these representations arise from the internal experience of these phenomena. This third kind of activity of the consciousness is not a judgment "this is to be loved or that is to be hated;" but it is simply a loving or hating that the internal perception shows us in an evident way.

At this point, Brentano argued that there is no fundamental distinction between feeling and will as proposed by Hamilton, Lotze, Kant and Wolff, among others, because the term appetite (apetitiol) is not adequate "[to cover all](#) psychic phenomena other than thinking," so that the acts of joy and sadness cannot be considered appetitive acts.

To this also contributed the ignorance of the relation between representation and judgment that led to confusion about the relation between feeling and will. And he reproaches Kant for limiting the feeling of pleasure and displeasure "unilaterally to the judgment of aesthetic taste."

If representation and judgment are psychic phenomena of a different class, and feeling and will are phenomena of the same class when the ideas of the true, the good and the beautiful are applied to them, they will correspond in this way: "[The supreme perfection](#) of the representative activity resides in the contemplation of the beautiful, whether through the influence of the object or independently of it"... The supreme activity of the judicative activity resides in the knowledge of truth, naturally and above all, in the knowledge of truths that reveal to us a rich fullness of being more than others... Finally, the supreme perfection of loving activity lies in the free elevation to the higher good."

The ideal of ideals consists in unity of all that is true, good and beautiful whose representation shows infinite beauty, infinite truth and infinite goodness. "[The triad of ideals](#) (of the beautiful, the true and the good) can very well be explained by the system of psychic phenomena."

We see once again, as it happened with other great philosophers of the twentieth century (Heidegger, Eugen Fink), how the classical theory of the transcendentals of the entity appears, although in a different form from that formulated formerly. In this case through the system of psychic phenomena of representation, judgment and emotional phenomena.

Moral Conscience—it is understood as the instance that deals with our own moral experience. Modern philosophy established it as the main mode of moral knowledge, as opposed to the “prudence” of classical antiquity and medieval *prudencia*. In introspection it allows us to delve into both our personal life and the life of the historical world. That is why when we speak of ethical questions, we speak at the same time of ourselves, of our experience, especially the older we get.

Moral conscience exists above all as an “inner voice” that guides us in our actions, but we cannot base ethics on moral conscience as Kant and the neo-Kantians tried to do, who, in order to understand ethics, started from the analysis of moral conscience. But this is not possible because we cannot free ourselves from the *quantum* of subjectivity of our conscience. And science cannot be built on subjectivity.

The philosopher does not draw the norms from himself but finds them in his vital situation; he finds them in that which governs the tasks of an epoch, as the most intimate conscience of this epoch. Of course, he can dissent and propose others, but this is only for a great philosopher who can leap over his time, thus contradicting Hegel's saying that no one can leap over his time.

If we would like to use moral conscience as a norm, we must necessarily complete it with historical objectivity, with the great cultural systems; that is to say, great effective and affective nexuses that unite men to carry out historical achievements, in order not to keep reinventing the wheel. This explains the tremendous effort made by Hegel, the greatest philosopher of the metaphysics of subjectivity in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, as a science of the experience of consciousness (1807), in order to justify the experience of moral and political consciousness.

Moral consciousness emerged as a process of emancipation from theology carried out by the Enlightenment in order to achieve with it an internal subjection of the modern subject. This was known by the term of the “principle of autonomy,” which began from the certainty of internal experience, and ended with the exaltation of the individual over the community, in an exaggerated liberalism: “I look after Number One”—in a society of exorbitant consumption and in a man transformed into a homunculus.

Moral conscience is there, present, it exists and we make daily use of it; but that does not mean that we can transform it into a norm, nor as a principle of freedom, for as Nicolai Hatmann, a former member of the Marburg School, observes very well in his magnificent *Ethics*: “One cannot make a conclusive

argument for the freedom of the will from the phenomenon of the consciousness of freedom. Therefore, neither from the consciousness of self-determination, a more reduced consciousness, but qualitatively equivalent to it."

And still less to raise it as a paradigm of universal history, as Hegel pretended in that enormous "sulfur factory" in which German idealism ended.

Alberto Buela is an Argentinian philosopher and professor at National Technological University and the University of Barcelona. He is the author of many books and articles.

Featured: "Man repels the Appeal of Conscience," by Frederic James Shields; painted in 1910.

