

# Contents

Bruno Leclercq, Sébastien Richard and Denis Seron

**Preface — V**

## **Part I: Ontological Parsimony**

Peter Simons

**How to Do Things with Things — 3**

Federico Boccaccini

**The Bounds of Object — 17**

Anna C. Zielinska

**Kotarbiński's Strong Minimalist Ontology — 39**

Robert Brisart

**Objects as Posits from a Phenomenological Point of View — 51**

Bruno Leclercq

**The Concept and its Object are (not) One and the Same — 63**

## **Part II: Objecthood Prodigality**

Maria Gyemant

**Objects or Intentional Objects? — 85**

Dale Jacquette

**Domain Comprehension in Meinongian Object Theory — 101**

Sébastien Richard

**Meinong and Early Husserl on Objects and States of Affairs — 123**

Guillaume Fréchette

**Essential Laws — 143**

Denis Seron

**Adolf Reinach's Philosophy of Logic — 167**

Claire Ortiz Hill

**Husserl's Way Out of Frege's Jungle — 183**

**Part III: Modes of Being**

Arkadiusz Chrudzimski

**Ingarden on Modes of Being — 199**

Roberto Poli

**Nicolai Hartmann's Theory of Levels of Reality — 223**

**Bibliography — 239**

**Index — 256**

Peter Simons

# How to Do Things with Things

## Brentano's Reism and its Limits

**Peter Simons:** Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

### 1 Introduction

From about 1904 until the end of his life in 1917, Franz Brentano held an ontological view which has come to be called reism. This is the view that the only things that exist are concrete things (*res*). The list of objects that this view denies existing is long indeed, and includes: properties and relations, whether considered as individual accidents or as universals; events and processes; facts and states of affairs; numbers, sets and all other mathematical objects; space and time as entities in their own right; intentional contents and objects; propositions, and other abstract senses or meanings. The objects that Brentano does accept as *entia realia* or things include as individuals mental souls, physical bodies and their parts and lower-dimensional boundaries, and collections of individuals. Brentano conceives it as possible that the primary physical things be of more than three dimensions: he calls such things *topoids*.

Brentano's ontology is thus, in comparison with that of most other philosophers, extremely sparse or parsimonious. Some medieval nominalists flirted with reism: John of Mirecourt considered that only the dogma of transubstantiation stood in the way of taking there to be only things. Brentano himself mentions Leibniz as a potential forebear, assuming the real for Leibniz to comprise only the monads, and not their successive states or modifications. Somewhat later, and independently of Brentano, Tadeusz Kotarbiński, to whom we owe the term "reism", came to the view that the only things are bodies which are extended in space and in time: his reism thus differed from Brentano's in an even more parsimonious direction and he favoured the term "pansomatism" for it. Brentano's view differs from Kotarbiński's not only in his acceptance of mental substances or souls, but also in his view of time: Brentano is a presentist, holding that only that which exists now, in the present, exists, and that no thing is extended in time, whereas for Kotarbiński all things are extended in time as well as in space.

Brentano's view was the culmination of a long and complex development in his ontology. His early work was carried out under the influence of Aristotle's

theory of categories, according to which there are several basic kinds of entity. While Brentano was never an uncritical follower of Aristotle, he was initially generally favourable to this idea, whereby alongside substances there are qualities, quantities, relations, actions, places and times. The *Psychology* of 1874 was already showing signs of ontological parsimony. According to his theory of the three basic kinds of mental acts: ideas, judgements and attitudes, the objects that are presented by ideas are also that which is accepted or denied in judgement, and which is liked or disliked in attitudes. Middle-period Brentano moved to a somewhat more ample theory, allowing judgements to have their own specific kinds of content, what would nowadays be called states of affairs. Over a period beginning in the 1890s, and following a somewhat obscure development, he came to his late and austere view. In good part this evolved in dialogue and debate with his former student Anton Marty, who predeceased him in 1914, and the latter's students Oskar Kraus and Alfred Kastil, who at first found it hard to follow Brentano, but eventually became his most vociferous supporters, as well as his literary executors after his death.

In later life, in part as a result of his blindness, Brentano found it difficult to put his views together into monograph-length accounts. He was more at home dictating relatively short notes and letters. His last major attempt at a treatise on ontology, again starting from Aristotle but being this time much more critical, occupied him for his last ten years. It arose through a number of preliminary notes and studies which represent shifting views, and went through three drafts, none of which made it into print, until the various notes and drafts were compiled by Kastil under the title *Kategorienlehre* and published in 1933. Since Brentano's text is often unclear in its import, Kastil, who by this stage was more familiar with Brentano's work than anyone, felt compelled to add over four hundred elucidatory notes. Brentano's final ontology is thus unfinished and unsystematic, although many of its basic positions and themes are fairly clear. So in this study I shall be concerned less with the way in which Brentano came to his views, which I still find puzzling, than with the question whether they, or something close to them, can be considered adequate as an ontology.

## 2 There are Things

By a *thing*, Brentano understands an entity which is particular, unrepeatable, and persisting through time. That there is at least one such thing is regarded by Brentano as evident via introspection. Introspection, or inner perception as Brentano calls it, reveals to me that in the flux of my mental activity there is a

persisting owner or bearer of these acts, a non-spatial, persisting and substantial item which may rightly be called a soul. Very much a Cartesian, Brentano regards this evidence as more secure than anything we might know or conjecture about the physical, spatial world. Since such evidence is infallible, I can be sure there is at least one thing: myself. Physical bodies provide further if less secure examples of things. They persist, but unlike souls are located in space and can move about. Both souls and bodies can change, and accounting for change becomes a major theme in Brentano's reistic ontology.

### 3 Everything is a Thing

Brentano has an argument purporting to show that there are only things. It goes as follows:

1. An object is something that can be thought about.
2. "think" is univocal.
3. To think is to think about something.
4. We think about things.

therefore:

5. Whatever we think about is a thing. (from 2, 3, 4)

therefore:

6. Every object is a thing. (from 1, 5)

The premises 1, 3 and 4 are relatively uncontroversial. Premise 3 is an application of Brentano's intentionality thesis. Premise 4 is empirical common sense. Premise 2 is perhaps not self-evident, but let us grant it for the sake of argument. The crucial transition is to statement 5. Brentano's idea is that if we could think about objects other than things, since we also think about things, this would make "think about" and thereby "think" equivocal, contradicting premise 2.

Formally speaking, this is a terrible argument. Here is an argument reproducing the form of 2-5:

- 2a. "eat" is univocal.
- 3a. To eat is to eat something.
- 4a. We eat apples.

therefore:

- 5a. Whatever we eat is an apple.

The premises are uncontroversially true, and the conclusion is uncontroversially false. Therefore the argument is invalid.

The difference must presumably turn on the fact that whereas “apple” is a material concept, “thing” is a formal or categorial concept. But this does not help Brentano, because suppose we replace “thing” by “quality” in the fourth premise:

4q. We think about qualities.

Since “quality” is no less a formal or categorial concept than “thing”, the argument ought to show that we only think about qualities and that everything is a quality. Brentano has an answer, which is to say that in cases where we supposedly think about qualities, relations, places, times, numbers etc., the term “think” is not being used in its proper or authentic sense, but in an improper or inauthentic sense, so that the supposed objects of thought in this case are not genuine but fictitious. This rejoinder is however clearly question-begging, since anyone not persuaded that that only things exist will legitimately resist the move to count thinkings of non-things as improper. The result is simply a stand-off.

Rather than further examine Brentano’s reasons for being a reist, I prefer then to simply accept that he has the view and see what can be done with it. The answer is perhaps surprising: more than one might at first think.

## 4 Accidents and Qualitative Change

One of the principle tasks of any ontology, and one which poses particular challenges for reism, is to offer an account of change. There are several kinds of change. One is motion, or change of position. We postpone consideration of this until later. Another is existential change, coming to be and ceasing to be. Here the reist is at no disadvantage over others, since it is the coming to be and ceasing to be of things that is principally of interest. The more interesting and challenging types of change are: qualitative change, quantitative change, and relational change.

Qualitative change is the most straightforward. Consider for example a tomato, which as it ripens changes in colour from green to yellow to orange to red. It is one and the same thing throughout, notwithstanding its gradual alteration in colour. Non-reistic ontologies, whether realist or nominalist about universals, have a ready explanation. They say that the tomato has different colour-properties at different times. If colours are universals, the tomato will successively exemplify a sequence of distinct universals. Typically, such theorists will say that the tomato’s being this colour at this time and that colour at that

time are two facts or states of affairs. This picture is familiar, and it is rejected by Brentano because he rejects universals and states of affairs. A nominalist account of qualities or properties such as is commonplace among medieval scholastics posits instead a sequence of colour-accidents or tropes which successively inhere in the tomato. When it changes colour, this amounts to one colour-trope going out of existence to be replaced by another from the same (colour) family, which comes into existence, each inhering in the same substance, the tomato. There are some complications involving differential change in different parts of the tomato's surface, but they can be coped with, and the general picture is the same. Qualitative change consists in the replacement of quality-tropes, the substance remaining in existence.

Brentano rejects this picture, because he rejects tropes. Since Aristotle, tropes have been conceived as items inhering in their substances as a kind of part which is inseparable from its substance and incapable of existing apart and alone, by contrast with other, separable and potentially free-standing parts such as the tomato's seeds or skin. This distinction between separable and dependent parts was highlighted and analysed by Brentano's student Husserl in the third of his *Logical Investigations*. Brentano, unlike Aristotle, is perfectly happy to accept parts of things which are not in fact separated, as being themselves genuine things, provided they are separable. So the skin of a tomato is a part of it and a thing, notwithstanding its actual connection to the rest of the tomato. Aristotle had considered such parts as only potential entities, not actual ones. Brentano however rejects the idea of an inseparable dependent part as at best an abstraction or fiction. His preferred way of dealing with change is to consider accidents not to be non-thing parts of substances, but things of which substances are parts, what in Aristotle are called accidental unities. Consider the tomato, the green tomato, and the red tomato which existed later. According to Brentano, these are three things, rather than one thing and two things-with-a-trope. The green tomato and the red tomato are concrete things which differ both qualitatively and in their times of existence: the green tomato ceases to be before the red tomato comes to be. They do however have the tomato itself as a common part, which persists throughout. That is how change is explained. The tomato changes in that it is successively part of different "enriched" things. Since a thing may change qualitatively in a number of ways, there can be many overlapping things which have the same tomato as part.

A natural question to put at this point is this. If the tomato is part of the green tomato and later a part of the red tomato, what is added to the tomato to give the green tomato, and what replaces this to give the red tomato? In mereological terms, since the tomato is not identical with the green or the red tomato, what is the mereological supplement making up the rest of the green, respectively red

tomato? Brentano's surprising answer is: nothing at all. He rejects the principle of mereology according to which if one thing is a (proper) part of another, there is another part of the whole disjoint from the first, the Weak Supplementation Principle. For Brentano the tomato is enriched to give the green tomato, and differently enriched to give the red tomato. But it is not enriched by any entity. If it were, this additional entity could not be a thing capable of independent existence, so it would be incompatible with reism to accept such a supplement.

Brentano appears to have no other good reason to reject the idea of a supplement than this. But it is surely analytically true of the concept of part that a part which is not the whole has a supplement, so at the very least Brentano is not entitled to call the relationship between a substance and its accident one of part to whole. What the relationship then could be is not clear. Once again Brentano's position gains no advantage over the bicategorical ontology of things and tropes, but the issue of the relationship aside, it does not appear to be at a material disadvantage either.

Quantitative change is somewhat more complicated. Consider our tomato again. It not only changes colour as it ripens, but also grows in size and gains in weight. The weight gain can be explained in terms of the addition of new parts to the tomato through the natural processes of plant metabolism. The tomato is after all a complex object composed of many parts, and there is no strong reason for Brentano to deny that such aggregative individuals may persist despite mereological change, the addition or loss of (some) parts. Such aggregative wholes may not be the most basic of individuals, but there is no reason to deny them their status as things. Likewise a tomato grows in size, diameter, surface area, and volume because new parts are added to it.

A different case is presented by a thing which grows, shrinks or otherwise changes its shape and/or size but without change of parts. A piece of steel wire for example is variable in length (Hooke's Law) as well as in shape, depending on all sorts of internal and external influences, a metal body which is heated will measurably expand without gaining parts, and organic bodies such as ourselves change their shape all the time. Brentano's account must be in such cases that the different parts of the thing change in their spatial relationships to one another, so it comes to be subsumed under the case of (relative) motion.



## 5 Relations

Brentano does not believe in relations as entities, whether these be universals or particulars. So how then does he account for relational truths, such as the following?

Caius is taller than Titus  
 The short-circuit caused the fire  
 The leg is part of the chair  
 The equator bounds the northern hemisphere  
 Dublin is 6349 km from Addis Ababa  
 Sherlock Holmes is more famous than Kurt Wallander

The answer is: variously. But there is a feature common to all of Brentano's treatments of relational truths, which is his distinction between two ways in which we think about things. If I simply say:

Caius is brave

then I am thinking of Caius directly, *modo recto*, as Brentano calls it. But in:

Caius is taller than Titus

I think of Caius directly, but Titus indirectly, *modo obliquo*. It is for Brentano characteristic of relational predications that all but one of its nominal subjects involves thinking *modo obliquo*. He normally only gives examples of binary relations, but a similar account will apply to relations of more than two places, such as:

Dublin is between Belfast and Wexford  
 John gave Mary the flowers

where only Dublin (resp. John) is thought about directly. The remainder of the sentence ascribes a relative determination to its subject which involves thinking of one or more things *modo obliquo*.

Aristotle considered that in all relational predications, all the terms have to exist, except in the case of intentional relations such as:

Karel is thinking about Pegasus

This can be true despite the fact that Pegasus does not exist, because in truly predicating this of Karel we think of Pegasus only *modo obliquo*, and so are not ontologically committed to Pegasus. In this regard, Brentano is wittingly or unwittingly recapitulating William of Ockham, for whom only subjects in the nominative case carry ontological import. Some relational predications involving relational predicates definitely are existing-entailing in all nominal positions: "cause", "eat",

“hit” and “marry” are examples. Relational predications where one of the terms does not have to exist for the predication to be true, as in the case of thinking about, are what Brentano calls “relation-like” (*relativlich*).

Relational change needs not directly affect a thing in itself. The example is Titus outgrowing Caius. Caius changes in no intrinsic way when he ceases to be taller than Titus due to the latter’s growth. Nor need the gain or loss of a part change the rest of an object. Suppose I have a long steel rod, one end of which gets scratched and loses a miniscule portion of metal. According to Aristotle, as Brentano interprets him, this spells the destruction of the original rod and its replacement by something which did not actually exist before, but was a potential object, lying in wait as it were, to spring into existence by the removal of the fractional part. Brentano quite rightly has nothing to do with this. Whether the rod before and after the scratch are one and the same body or two different bodies, the portion which came to be the whole rod clearly pre-existed the scratch, and is not brought into existence, but only into totality, by the removal of the small part. It is in itself unchanged by ceasing to be attached to the lost piece.

## 6 Thinkers

The distinction between *modo recto* and *modo obliquo* thinking or, to use a different terminology, existence-entailing versus non-entailing slots in a predication, is certainly a useful one, whatever one’s views about the existence of relations as entities in their own right. However, as the Sherlock Holmes example indicates, a relational predication need not have any existing object thought of *modo recto*. So the question arises as to what in the world is responsible for its being true, since neither Holmes nor Wallander is in the world. A modern approach would be to *analyse* the notion of being famous, somewhat as follows:

A is more famous than B = (Def.) More people have heard about A than B

The definiens, or as some would call it, the “logical form”, on the right-hand side, renders the ontological commitments and truth-conditions of the original predication more transparent. Clearly, in a singular predication such as:

N has heard about A

the subject term is taken *modo recto* and the object term *modo obliquo*. So the “definition” of “more famous than” does not entail the existence of either term. Nor of course does it exclude it, as in the truth:

Barack Obama is more famous than Michael D. Higgins

It may be surprising, but Brentano would be quite happy with such an analysis. The only modification he might take would be to make the terms of the numerical comparison more patently nominal, as in:

A-thinkers are more numerous than B-thinkers

He would certainly not object to the use of numerical comparator quantifiers.

In this case the predication apparently about two non-existing things is happily exposed as one which is a generalization about thinkers: happily, because “famous” is clearly mind-involving, and because the truth-conditions of the analysed sentence are preserved in its analysans.

Brentano is however much more ready to bring minds into the picture than this, and takes a wide range of sentences which would appear to have nothing to do with minds to in fact be generalizations about minds and their objects, thought *modo obliquo* of course. For example, the modal proposition (regarding some thing or things A):

A are impossible

is interpreted by Brentano as:

Whoever apodictically rejects A does so correctly

which, by Brentano’s analysis of quantifier sentences, receives its canonical form:

There are no apodictic rejecters of A who are incorrect rejecters of A

where “A” is always *modo obliquo* but “rejecters of A” is *modo recto*.

This is far less happy than the “famous” example. Firstly, it is far from being a sense-preserving paraphrase: the initial sentence said nothing about those who judge there are no A. Secondly, it has the wrong truth-conditions, since A might be possible but there simply happen to be no thinkers thinking about them at all, let alone apodictically and correctly rejecting them. Of course at this point Brentano could wheel in God, who thinks about everything and correctly accepts and rejects with evidence whatever is to be correctly accepted or rejected. This is a tempting albeit cheap expedient for all theists, and unless and until such a God’s existence be proven, to be avoided.

Even logic is not immune to this invasion of minds. Brentano’s favoured reading for the principle of non-contradiction:

Nothing is both A and not A

is:

It is impossible for someone who denies what another correctly accepts to do so correctly, or for someone who accepts what another correctly denies to do so correctly.

Taking into account the above analysis of “impossible” and restoring the schematic variable “A”, this is probably best rendered as:

It is impossible that there be both correct rejecters of A and correct accepters of A

which by the analysis of “impossible” above comes out somewhat as:

There are no apodictic rejecters of (both correct rejecters of A and correct accepters of A) who are incorrect rejecters of (both correct rejecters of A and correct accepters of A).

It is hard to know where to start in listing the problems with this, and not especially enlightening or rewarding to do so. Suffice it to say that it is preferable to take the original simple form as the logical starting point and not look for a version taking a roundabout route via minds. In retrospect, it looks as though Husserl’s assessment of Brentano’s logic as psychologistic was right on the money.

## 7 Space

Brentano for the most part rejects Newtonian absolute space, but this makes it important that he have a decent account of the relations among things in space, which he does not. In virtue of what, for example, is Dublin 6349 km from Addis Ababa (on the great circle)? Not in virtue of relations, since there are none, and not in virtue of their relationship to an autonomously existing space, since there is none. Perhaps the best account would invoke the actuality or possibility of a line or a body completely filling the gap between Dublin and Addis – there is actually one, the air (*Luftlinie*!) – but this pushes the question back to the question as to why the extremities of this tubular body are 6349 km apart, so we are no further forward. In the case of bodies separated by “empty space” such as the Earth and the Moon, there is no such body, so we would have to invoke possibility, and we would be back to thinkers.

Brentano lays special stress on the notion of a boundary. His understanding is taken from Aristotle. A three-dimensional body such as a cube has a two-dimensional surface consisting of six suitably joined squares: each of these has a linear square boundary consisting of four suitable joined straight lines of equal length, and non-opposite ones of these in turn meet in points. Brentano accepts

that boundaries exist and are parts of the things they bound, but they are dependent on their bounded bodies in a subtle way. They cannot exist on their own. Were the whole body to be annihilated, the boundary would go with it, but the boundary could be annihilated (e.g. by friction) without the rest of the body disappearing. Conversely, the body could be pared away successively and still leave enough for some of the boundaries to bound a remnant. Boundaries exist not just at the extremities of a body but internally as well, as for example the disc between the Earth's northern and southern hemispheres, or the equator, or the axis of rotation. Boundaries can also be of more than one thing at once, so unlike bodies can wholly coincide: the edge between two square faces of a cube is an edge of each face, but also of many other planar objects within the cube and coming just up to the edge. Like Leibniz, Brentano denies that continua like the edge, face or cube are made up of dimensionless points, but he accepts the points as boundaries of higher order, boundaries of boundaries of boundaries. Brentano's theory of boundaries, to be found in part in the *Kategorienlehre* but in greater detail in the later, likewise posthumous *Philosophische Untersuchungen zu Raum, Zeit und Kontinuum*, is challenging but extremely rich in detail and insight.

## 8 Time

Unlike modern physicists, Brentano strictly separates time from space. In the light of modern relativity theory – which he rejects – this is questionable position, though one he shared with many. More importantly, Brentano is what we now call a presentist. For him, to exist is to exist now. There are no things wholly in the past, and no things wholly in the future. It is incorrect to say Napoleon exists, but correct to say he existed. Brentano regards the non-present tenses as corresponding to particular modes of judgement. When I accept Napoleon in a pastward mode, I do so correctly; when I accept the house to be built on this site in a futureward mode, and the house does get built, I do so correctly. If no such house gets built, my futureward acceptance is incorrect. This is relatively familiar both from medieval and modern accounts of the truth-conditions of tensed sentences. It does leave Brentano with a problem about temporal distance or elapsed interval however, one which he shares with other presentists. It is true that the First World War broke out 99 years after the conclusion of the Napoleonic wars. So in virtue of what is this correct judgement about temporal distance (*Abstand*) true? It cannot be a relation, because there are none, and even if there were, the two terms do not coexist in the same present, so one or both of them could only be mentioned *modo obliquo*. Also the statement about their distance apart is, the tense of its ex-

pression aside, invariant over time. It belongs to what in the terminology deriving from McTaggart are called B-statements. I can find no satisfactory answer to this question in Brentano, which is unsurprising, since it is the temporal analogue of the question about spatial distance, made more problematic by the fact that at least things a certain spatial distance apart exist at the same time, whereas things whose lives do not overlap never do. This problem also affects Brentano's account of causation, since he takes causes always to precede their effects.

An additional problem for Brentano's view, as he recognises, is that the present is not a continuum but the boundary between the past and the future. As a boundary it ought to depend on them both, yet as non-present, neither of them exists. How can the existent depend on the non-existent? One aspect of a solution must be that the idea of *the Present* is an abstraction. What really exists is not a time or times, but things. When something such as a star or a river continues in existence over a period, then whenever it exists, except at the beginning and end perhaps, it used to exist for a while and it will exist for a while. So it as existing now is continuous with it as it used to exist and it as it will exist. There are not a plethora of things here, but one thing with a plethora of changing aspects, which are not themselves entities, if one will. So rather than the Present one really should speak of *this* present, *this* thing now. It may coexist with other things now, and on this basis one might build up a section across the universe and call that the Present.

Whether this approach or something recognisably like it is workable is a difficult issue. I am inclined to think it cannot be made to work, even disregarding the complex relationship between space and time. But Brentano's account of space and time is not the only one to face a barrage of difficulties, and only a genius or a fool would claim to have the last word in this tricky area.

## 9 Motion

If space and time are both problematic for a reist, then all the more so is motion, which involves them both. Consider the usual example, a billiard ball rolling across the table. The ball exists before, throughout and after the motion, as does the table. The ball rolls, so that the orientation of its parts around the centre or a horizontal axis of rotation changes continuously, as does the area in which it is in contact with the table. The distances between the ball and its parts and other surrounding objects likewise change continuously. All of this can be studied by kinematics. Brentano is in no way disposed to challenge the mathematics of the situation, but what his ontological assessment of it amounts to, given his denial



of relations and his insistence on the existence of only what is present, is hard to see.

In a late and admittedly tentative piece dictated on 30 January 1915, placed by Kastil as an Appendix to the *Kategorienlehre*, Brentano looks with favour on a conjecture floated by Lord Kelvin that there be one large basic substance, a sort of all-encompassing homogeneous fluid, within which what we think of as bodies are temporary and mobile vortices or accidents, mutually impenetrable and obeying the laws of mechanics. This would replace corporeal substances as the non-mental basic substances by this one unitary substance, along with its parts and boundaries. The substance would not move, indeed the idea of its moving would lack sense, and what we think of as movement would be in fact the successive qualification of distinct parts of the substance by accidents resembling those recently in adjacent parts. This would not be bodily motion in the accepted sense, but something more akin to the progress of a wave through a fluid or of an image across a film or television screen. While not subscribing wholeheartedly to the picture, Brentano claims that because, unlike our transparent knowledge of ourselves, the true nature of the physical world is hidden from us, such a theory which may solve problems such as the apparent lack of an aether deserves serious consideration. It is rare indeed to find a 77-year-old exhibiting such flexibility of intellect.

## 10 Conclusion

Brentano's late ontology of reism is alike tantalising and frustrating, in that it bristles with novel insights and interesting alternatives to more familiar views while remaining incomplete and dubiously consistent. There are many aspects of his late philosophy and even of his late ontology which have been omitted or only grazed here, and I am very conscious of skating rapidly over much thin ice. Nevertheless I think it is fairly clear that reism in the form in which Brentano upholds it, a dualist, presentist reism of persistent things (if persistence and presentism are not themselves conflicting), is untenable in many regards. Whether a more adequate version of reism can be found is a moot point, not least because we cannot today be as sanguine as Brentano was about what we mean by a "thing". Perhaps tropes, or fields, or some other sort of item can provide the sole category of furniture for the universe, in which case Brentano's nominalistic and monocategorical instincts would be retrospectively justified, even if the details of his approach are rejected. Or perhaps not. *Man wird sehen – vielleicht.*

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