

## Brentano and the Direct Attribution Theory

According to Brentano, what is characteristic of every mental activity is the reference to something as an object. The exact nature of the objects of our mental activity has, however, been the subject of controversy for contemporary philosophers of mind. This controversy has been deepened by the emergence of alternatives to the traditional proposition view, according to which the objects of our mental attitudes are propositions. One such alternative can be found in the Direct Attribution theory developed by Roderick Chisholm. On the Direct Attribution view, mental attitudes involve a relation between a person and a property. Propositional attitudes, therefore, become attributional attitudes, involving ontologically a thinker as the subject; a property, which may be considered the content of thought; and an intentional relation between the subject and content. All intentional attitudes are considered to be a matter of »attributing certain properties directly to oneself.« The advantage claimed by the Attribute view over the Proposition view is that the former eliminates the need for ontological commitment to singular propositions as the contents of monadic or relational singular sentences with names or indexicals to express subject terms. It also avoids the epistemological requirement that people who use sentences that purportedly express such propositions can directly grasp those propositions, violating any ontologically objective feature of propositions. Accompanying the rejection of singular propositions is a rejection of individual essences like *Socrateity*, or the *property of being me*, and the *property of being you*. All such properties are supposedly possessed necessarily and uniquely by the one who has these properties. It is dissatisfaction with the Proposition view's account of that special case of indexical reference which is self-reference, that has led to the development of the Attribute view.

On the Attribute view, self-referentiality is a component of the mental attitude itself, not one of the attitude's object. This avoids the need for any conception of the self involving awareness of one's own individual essence. In proposing this view, Chisholm sees himself as following Brentano who maintained that, »in those self-evident states of mind that 'present themselves' to us, we never grasp any properties that are individuating.«<sup>1</sup> Thus, Chisholm tells us, »According to [Brentano], any property of mine that thus presents itself to me is one which, theoretically at least, can be exemplified in several different things at once.«<sup>2</sup> Indeed, if we look closely at Chisholm's theory of Direct Attribution, we

may come to see Chisholm as engaged in what might be called a *Brentanian enterprise* - a task involving more than simply interpreting and seeking to understand what Brentano *has* said, but going further in endeavoring to tell us what Brentano *might have said*. This enterprise is marked by the development of a doctrine suggested by Brentano in his final theory of sensation to all other types of thinking. In the process, Chisholm hopes to make clear the sense in which Brentano was correct in considering the self as a part of every mental attitude.

In what follows, I shall elucidate the relationship between the Direct Attribution theory and Brentano's final theory of sensation, and consider a recent challenge by Hector Castañeda, that while the Brentanian-Chisholmian account is exemplary in dealing with tacit self-reference at the level of unreflective consciousness, that the theory needs to be developed even further to be adequate to those cases of self-reference involved in reflective consciousness.

Let us begin by turning to Brentano's theory of sensation. According to Brentano, every mental act, including acts of sensing, has within it a consciousness of itself. Thus, every act of sensing has a double object: an external object and an inner object. Consider an act of hearing. An act of hearing has the sound as its external object and the mental phenomenon in which the sound is heard as the inner object. Aristotle had said that the latter is apprehended only incidentally or secondarily as something additional. Following Aristotle, then, Brentano refers to the mental phenomenon in which the sound is heard as the *secondary object* and the sound as the primary object.

Brentano maintains that the process which sensing involves might also be understood by appeal to the distinction between two modes of presentation - presentation *in modo recto* and presentation *in modo obliquo*. By way of illustration, he offers the following:

There are various modes of presentation, and, in particular, there is a difference between that which is presented in *recto* and that which is presented in *obliquo*. If, for example, I think of someone who loves, I think not only of the one who loves but also of something else which is loved by him, and I think of this *second thing in modo obliquo*. The same thing occurs with regard to sensing in so far as we sense ourselves as sensing beings.<sup>3</sup>

In the earlier doctrine of sensation set forth by Brentano in the *Psychology*, he proposed that every mental activity is related to itself as an object, not directly, but indirectly, *in modo obliquo*. The mental act of hearing is related to sound as an object *in modo recto* or directly, and has itself as an indirect object *in modo obliquo*. Furthermore, the mentally active subject is an object of secondary reference regardless of what is referred to as the primary object.

But in Brentano's final theory of sensation presented in *Sensory and Noetic Consciousness* he asks us to consider the following possibility: »We, as sensing beings, are the only things that are sensed *in recto* while our external objects are sensed solely *in obliquo*.«<sup>4</sup> This new way of looking at sensing may be seen as a mirror-image of the earlier doctrine set forth in the *Psychology*. Brentano is now entertaining the possibility that the subject is the direct object of sensing and the external sense quality is the indirect object. It is *the sensing being*, not that

which is sensed, which is the direct object. We apprehend a sense-quality by apprehending ourselves directly. Brentano adds,

Strictly speaking, then, we would not be dealing with a double perception, but with a unitary one, the self-perception, the inner-perception, which allows us, at the same time, to present external objects *in modo obliquo* as our phenomena, and therefore, *in modo obliquo*.<sup>5</sup>

The advantage of this interpretation, Brentano points out, is that the external object, in this case, is affirmed only as phenomenal »regardless of the fact that it may later on lead to the affirmation of the external object as actually existing.«<sup>6</sup> If I have as a direct object of sensing, myself as experiencing a sound, then even though the sensing will be directly evident to me, I am not thereby committed to the existence of the sense-quality which is the sound, any more than one who judges that someone affirms the existence of God is thereby committed to affirming God's existence. Thus, according to Brentano's final view of sensation, to say that »a phenomenon exists« in the strict sense should be understood as expressing, »someone who experiences a phenomenon exists«.<sup>7</sup> The advantage of simplicity Brentano saw in looking at matters this way is that in sensing we are committed ontologically only to the subject (the thinker) and the subject's mental states.

While it is not clear that Brentano ever fully embraced this final doctrine of sensation, it is quite suggestive in terms of the problem of objective reference. In extending it to all other types of thinking, Chisholm attempts to show that the most plausible solution to the problem of how it is possible for one thing to direct its thoughts on another is one that involves the person him or herself as the *primary* object of all intentional attitudes. Our reference to all other things is by way of reference to ourselves.

Let's move on then to consider in greater detail the theory of objective reference proposed by Chisholm. As we've seen, on Chisholm's account of objective reference, every intentional attitude involves directly attributing or believing certain properties »directly of oneself«. In putting forth his views, Chisholm takes the following as an undefined location:

»The property of being F is such that X believes it directly of Y«

He goes on to add that,

For every X and every Y, if X believes being F directly of Y, then Y is identical with X.

Thus, according to Chisholm, every act of thinking includes a direct attribution or attribution *in modo recto* to oneself. Further, it is assumed one can directly attribute properties only to oneself. Suppose I now believe that I am sitting. The mental act of believing is not directed upon the first-person proposition that I am sitting. Rather, it is directed upon myself as an object and a property as the content. In this case, I self-attribute the property of sitting. It does *not* follow from this, however, that I believe myself to have the property of sitting. This is an important point for one might be tempted to reject at the outset any account of believing that requires us to have a concept of properties. After all, isn't it

unreasonable to expect of the barber next door that in order for him to believe he is sitting that he has the concept of the property of sitting and that when he thinks he is sitting he goes through the process of attributing this property to himself in such a way that he believes himself to have the property of sitting. Chances are, he's never even wondered whether there are such things as properties, so how can the Direct Attribution theory account for his act of believing himself to be sitting? And what about those nominalists who reject properties altogether? Certainly in believing themselves to be sitting, they do not believe themselves to have the property of sitting. To recognize that on the Direct Attribution theory, I do not need to have a concept of properties, or to believe that there are such entities really existing in order to attribute a property to myself, we need only to compare the Attribute theory with the Propositional account of objective reference. According to the Proposition view, if I believe *that I am sitting*, I accept a proposition denoted by the *that*-clause, that I am sitting. This, however, does not imply that in order to believe I am sitting, and so accept the proposition that I am sitting, I must have a concept of a proposition.

Further, it should not be thought that in order to attribute a property directly to oneself that one thereby needs to have a concept of oneself. It is not necessary to have a concept of self at all in order to be able to believe oneself to have a certain property.

What happens now, when my belief is a belief about someone other than myself? Suppose, for example, I believe *you* to be sitting. In this case there is a property I believe directly of me and this property is one that relates me just to you. Because attributing a property to another thing involves attributing a property to oneself, beliefs about others are said to be cases of *indirect attribution*. In this case one attributes a property to oneself *in recto* and to another *in obliquo*. How is this possible? If I believe you to be sitting, something like the following situation would take place. Suppose I am talking to you and you are the only person in the room who just presented a paper. The property of talking to the only person in the room who just presented a paper and with a person who is sitting is a property that I attribute directly to myself. Presumably there are many different ways in which, by referring directly to myself, I may refer indirectly to you. Any one of these ways is sufficient to pick you out.

According to Chisholm then,

*x* believes being *F* indirectly of *y* = Df. There is a relation *R* such that (a) *X* bears *R* only to *y* and (b) the attribute of bearing *R* to just one thing and to a thing that is *F* is one that *x* believes directly of *x*.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike direct attribution, indirect attribution can involve attributing properties to others. However, it is not exclusive to others, since one may indirectly attribute properties to oneself if, say, one is unaware that the person one is referring to is oneself. Therefore, Chisholm defines *x* believes *y* to be *F* as either (a) *x* believes being *F* directly of *y* or (b) *x* believes being *F* indirectly of *y*.

With this brief introduction to Chisholm's theory of objective reference, we can go on to consider a recent objection by Castañeda, that while this theory can adequately explain self-reference in unreflective consciousness, it needs to be extended further to account for self-reference in reflective consciousness. In order to understand Castañeda's objection fully, we might first distinguish various levels of self-awareness or self-consciousness.

According to Brentano, there is a two-fold way in which something, including the self, may be said to be an object of awareness. One may be aware of objects explicitly and distinctly or implicitly and indistinctly. He points out that,

If one hears a chord and distinguishes the notes which are contained in it, then one has a direct awareness of the fact that he hears it. But if one does not distinguish the particular notes, then one has only an indistinct awareness of them. In such a case, he does hear them together and he is aware of the whole which is the hearing and to which the hearing of each particular note belongs; but he does not hear the whole in such a way that he distinguishes each of its parts. Particular hearings of particular notes are contained in the whole and he does not distinguish them.<sup>9</sup>

Applying this distinction between explicit or distinct awareness and implicit or indistinct awareness to the self, Brentano says,

If a person feels pain, then he is aware of himself as one that feels the pain. But perhaps he does not distinguish the substance, which here feels pain, from the accident by means of which the substance appears to him.<sup>10</sup>

These types of experiences involving implicit self-awareness are to be contrasted with cases in which the person's indistinct awareness of the self is replaced by a distinct awareness of the self as that which thinks, experiences, judges, loves, hates, and which underlies all these changes in accidents. In fact, it is a result of the frequent changes in our mental experiences that we are led to a distinct awareness of the self as that which gives unity to these various experiences.

Brentano maintains that it is only *because* this same substance which underlies all of the experiences which are in inner perception is capable of having an awareness of itself, that we call it a *self*. A substance may be called a self according to Brentano, »only when it has a cognition which pertains to itself«.<sup>11</sup>

It may be, says Brentano, that animals have only an indistinct self-awareness. Nevertheless, they have a self-awareness. It is at this level of awareness, argues Castañeda, that Chisholm's analysis is most useful. Castañeda views the distinction between what he calls »cognitive unreflective consciousness« at this level and »cognitive reflective consciousness or self-consciousness« that occurs when one has a distinct and explicit awareness of the self as of the utmost importance, and wants to allow that the complexity of the latter may require several more distinctions within the level itself. The basic difference between the two levels is that experiences in cognitive reflective consciousness seem to be »I unified« in a way that those in cognitive unreflective consciousness are not. As Castañeda points out, »the self-ascription« or self-attribution »posited by the attribute view is present in all episodes of consciousness«.<sup>12</sup> He says,

To think of *x* or that *p* is to relate oneself to *x* or that *p*, but at one level this is trivial, just as one relates oneself to a chair that one kicks or sits on. Here is a *self* component all right, but there is no *self-reference*. In thinking, besides creating a relation, one *attributes* to oneself a property, and this oneself is not an *I*, or an *ego*, but simply the very same massive infinitely-propertyed entity that others see as making noises or kicking chairs.... This view is nicely Fichtean in a moderate sense: all consciousness is diffusely self-consciousness, and all reference is tacit self-reference.<sup>13</sup>

The real difficulty for Chisholm's analysis, according to Castañeda, results from considering cases of reflective self-consciousness or what Brentano referred to as cases of explicit and distinct awareness of the self. In such cases, it would seem that we have the self as the *content* of thought and not simply as a part of the *act* of thinking. Here we have a genuine *self-reference*. Castañeda presents a particularly clever and interesting illustration of the difficulty in the form of a story called »Gaskon's Latest Adventure«. The story is this:

Gaskon has recently moved into his fully mirrored mansion, with walls covered with different types of mirrors. Two evenings ago some of the most charming and creative philosophers surprised him with a most pleasurable entertainment. They talked about self-identity, self-recognition, and they took full advantage of the mirrors and arranged and re-arranged them to illustrate different types of epistemic situations. After seeing everybody out, or so Gaskon thought, he turned around and saw as if in a dream a man who looked like a cross between John Perry and David Kaplan, yet he felt as if he were looking at himself; Gaskon even thought quickly of some movies where a character talks to his inner self both played by James Stewart – or was it Cary Grant? They were staring at each other; then Gaskon heard himself in the mirror saying: »You and I are very different types of persons; we have different tastes in metaphysics.« He recognized his voice. The staring continued as painful as the enveloping silence. Then Gaskon blinked, and the truth dawned upon him. In fact, his friends had arranged a recording to sound out at a particular time.<sup>14</sup>

In a letter describing this most interesting experience, Gaskon writes,

It was unnerving. There I was ostensibly telling myself that I was different from myself. I realize now that for a moment I believed that I thought that *I* was not identical with me.<sup>15</sup>

In reflecting upon this story, one may suspect that Castañeda's Gaskon has committed what Chisholm has referred to as the »reporting fallacy« or the »fallacy of literal interpretation« in describing his experiences. This fallacy is committed whenever one, in giving an indirect report of an intentional attitude, takes the actual content of the attitude to be that which is reported, as in »Columbus believed the land we call 'Cuba' was in the West Indies«. Hence, it must be that Columbus knew about Cuba. But how could he since it wasn't yet Cuba?

One might have similar doubts about whether Gaskon, in this case, really believes himself to not be identical with himself even if the experience was reported as such. Even if the content of Gaskon's belief is something different from what is reported, however, we do seem to have a case here where the self is referred to explicitly and distinctly and is, in fact, a part of the content of thought. If Chisholm were to admit singular properties or individual essences such as the property of being *me* into his ontology, then we could say that Gaskon directly attributes to

Gaskon the property of not being Gaskon, which is quite different, of course, from the property of being self-identical. Yet Chisholm rejects these properties even though there do seem to be many occasions on which reflective individuals reflect on themselves.

Two questions arise at this point, then. First, if explicit awareness or consciousness of the self does not involve awareness of some individual essence on Chisholm's view, what *does* this experience involve? Second, how can this experience be incorporated into the theory of Direct Attribution if it isn't already included? In response to the first question, Chisholm would agree with Castañeda that we may distinguish various levels of consciousness.<sup>16</sup> Sensitive consciousness would stand at the bottom of the hierarchy, followed by cognitive unreflective consciousness and finally cognitive reflective consciousness, which itself may contain several levels. On Chisholm's view, the lowest level would involve cases where one directly attributes a property and so where there is a property such that one believes it directly of oneself. Yet in these cases, one need not have acquired a concept of oneself in order to directly attribute such properties as being sad, or being hungry, or being in pain.

In having a belief about oneself at this level, unlike having a belief about someone else, one is not required to be able to individuate or identify oneself as a self. In thinking about someone else, I must first be able to pick out that person by means of some special relation, but I don't need to pick myself out in the same way in order to directly attribute a property to myself at this level.

In the lower levels of consciousness there is no explicit or distinct consciousness of the self which would be expressed as »I am sad«, »I am hungry« or »I am in pain« by those having these experiences, even if they could express their experiences. Nor is it required that those having these experiences be able to have a concept of sadness, hunger, or pain. What is experienced, if it could be expressed, would amount to »There is a sad-one«, »There is a hungry-one«, or »There is one in pain«. The self is a part of these experiences, but as Brentano suggests, only in an implicit and indistinct way.

A second stage of self-consciousness for Chisholm, involves consciousness at the level of indirect attribution. This type of awareness might come about in situations where one makes a direct attribution of some property such as the property of being fed by something or someone, and in the process indirectly attributes to another the property of feeding something or someone. This process involves making a distinction between two things - one feeding, the other being fed. If, in doing so, one directly attributes the property of diversity or being *other than* the one who is feeding, one comes closer to the concept of the self as *a self* than the simple experiences of sensitive consciousness.

A third stage, Chisholm suggests, might be one in which instead of directly attributing being sad to oneself and directly attributing being hungry to oneself, one attributes *being sad and hungry* to oneself. There is a unity to these distinct experiences in this case, but one is not yet aware that the unity is provided by

the self, and so one has not yet identified the one who is sad with the one who is hungry.

Finally, there is the stage at which one sees that the one who is sad is the one who is hungry. This distinct awareness of the self arrives when as Brentano points out, »one grasps this substance as that which permanently underlies this change and which gives unity to its manifold character.«<sup>17</sup> This experience does not involve the grasping of any individual essence according to Chisholm. Rather, it involves identifying the subject which underlies two different experiences as the *same* subject. It is not easy to see, Chisholm claims, what more self awareness *could* be said to involve unless we are referring to self-awareness or consciousness in the extended sense of being aware of one's motivations, limitations, and talents.

Let's move on to our second question, then. Can the Direct Attribution theory capture the self as a part of the content of believing as would seem necessary in certain cases of reflective self-consciousness? Consider the lower level experience »There is someone who is sad«. On the Direct Attribution theory this becomes »x directly attributes the property of being sad«. Now compare this with the higher level experience »*I am the one who is sad*«. In this case, too, x directly attributes the property of being sad. How is the »I«, which seems to be a part of the content of some experiences at a higher level captured on this account? Well, in this case we could add, »x directly attributes the property of being sad and x directly attributes the property of being the one who is sad«. But now consider the following experience: »I need to stop myself from feeling sad«. Must we add another level of self-consciousness to deal with this experience? Perhaps, since it is not clear how Chisholm's analysis can explain such an experience. It's worth noting at this point, though, that in attempting to determine how the concept of the self might be included in the content of thought, we need to discover first the experience which gives rise to this concept, and exactly what this concept involves. Discovering this and capturing it in the content of belief on the propositional account seems no less difficult a task than for the Attribute theory. This is a worthy challenge, but certainly not one exclusive to Chisholm's account of objective reference. If, as Chisholm and Brentano have suggested, however, our intentional acts are such that it is evident to us that we perform them, then the awareness of the subject is an essential part of every such act.

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## Notes

- 1 Franz Brentano, *Psychology From an Empirical Standpoint* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), pp.311-15.
- 2 Roderick Chisholm, »Revisions of the first Person« (unpublished, July 22, 1987), p.6.
- 3 Franz Brentano, *Sensory and Noetic Consciousness* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p.28.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 *Ibid.*, p.109.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p.29.
- 7 See Roderick Chisholm, »The Objects of Sensation: A Brentano Study«, forthcoming in: *Topoi*, 1988.
- 8 Roderick Chisholm, »The Primacy of the Intentional« in: *Synthese* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Press, 1984), p.93.
- 9 Franz Brentano, *The Theory of Categories* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Press, 1981), p.117.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.*, p.118.
- 12 Hector-Neri, »Self-Consciousness, Demonstrative Reference, and the Self-Ascription View of Believing« in: *Philosophical Perspectives* Vol. 1 *Metaphysics*, edited by James Tomberlin (Ridgeview, 1987), p.406.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p.426.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p.437.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Roderick Chisholm, »Direct Attribution«, unpublished manuscript, March 6, 1988.
- 17 Franz Brentano, *The Theory of Categories*, p.117.