

THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF FRANZ BRENTANO AND THE BRENTANO SCHOOL

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Brentano on Genius and Fantasy

Ion Tănăsescu

Franz Brentano addressed the genius issue in a presentation held in Vienna for the Association of Engineers and Architects and published in 1892 as the pamphlet *Das Genie (The Genius)*. The text was later reprinted in *Grundzüge der Ästhetik* (Brentano 1959). The genius issue is also addressed occasionally in *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* and is involved in Brentano's view on aesthetics as practical discipline in his 1885–6 course “*Ausgewählte Fragen aus Psychologie und Ästhetik*” (Selected Questions from Psychology and Aesthetics), also published (in an abbreviated and amended version) in *Grundzüge der Ästhetik*. I shall present Brentano's views on genius from his 1892 paper, using the other mentioned texts to complete some less clear aspects of *The Genius*. I will also address the issue of fantasy presentation in the 1885–6 course and its relevance to Brentano's analysis on genius.

The main task of *The Genius* is to clarify the nature of the activity of the creative genius, whether scientist or artist. In his analysis, Brentano starts from the usual characterization of the word: a genius is an unusual, uncommon talent. From his standpoint, the work of a creative genius raises two issues: (1) whether there is a gradual difference or an essential one between the activity of a genius and the activity of a common creator; and (2) whether this activity is or is not an unconscious activity, a result of “inspiration” (perhaps divine), leaving no room for rational activity (Brentano 1959: 88–9).¹ Brentano's view of genius is a combination of the following two theses: first, that the difference between genius and common creativity is gradual rather than essential, a difference of degree rather than a difference of kind; secondly, that the activity of genius is conscious rather than unconscious.

In *The Genius*, this second issue is addressed partly in terms of a traditional opposition between common artist and genius with respect to their conforming to rules. Common artists are working by the rules, are inspired by their predecessors, and do not hesitate to resort to means of rational reflection in order to overcome the difficulties faced in the process of artistic labor. In contrast, artists of genius create unconsciously, with no

respect to rules or to rational thinking. Aeschylus, Euripides, Plato, Aristotle, Ovid, Jean Paul, Goethe, and Kant are only some of the artists and philosophers who maintained this view on the creative genius's work (1959: 93–6). At first glance, Brentano's view in the 1885–6 course seems to differ: Brentano claims that rules do play a role in the activity of the creative genius (1959: 10–12). However, Brentano's course does not deal with the issue of the nature of the creative activity but with the issue of rules that *maintain and enhance* the creative “inner tendencies,” including the “ingenious ability” of artists. Establishing these rules is important to Brentano because it is meant to justify his view of aesthetics as a practical discipline. According to Brentano, one of the main tasks of aesthetics is to provide guidance on how beauty is produced, and how it is acting upon the sensitivity of the contemplator. In this respect, Brentano believes that rules are important for the genius, not in the sense that the genius creates by following rules, however, but in the sense that his innate aesthetic sensitivity is shaped by studying the works of his fore-runners and by internalizing the rules according to which they were created (1959: 6–14).

The thesis of the unconscious work of the creative genius clearly contradicts one of the basic theses of Brentano's psychology, namely the idea that *there are no unconscious mental phenomena*. In his empirical psychology, Brentano examines no less than four arguments for the existence of unconscious mental phenomena, only to reject them in favor of the thesis that mental life consists exclusively of conscious phenomena (Brentano 1995a: 105–26). For Brentano, a conscious act is directed primarily toward its object, and secondarily *toward itself*: I see a red spot on the horizon, and at the same time *I am aware of seeing it* (see Chapter 5). Thus, the thesis of the unconscious work of the creative genius actually implies that there are unconscious mental acts, acts characterized by directedness toward a primary object but lacking directedness toward themselves.

From this perspective, Brentano's first thesis about creative genius can be formulated as follows: between the activity of a genius and that of a common artist there is no essential difference but only a gradual one. For an essential difference between the two would open the possibility of a narrow group of people, the geniuses, who, unlike ordinary people, would appear as supermen privileged by the fact that, during the process of creation, they have access to a mental life consisting of unconscious mental acts (Brentano 1959: 97, 119). Such a view would compromise the conscious character of all mental life, something Brentano could not accept. In his discussion of the idea that some mental phenomena can be defined as a result of the action of some other unconscious mental phenomena, Brentano refers only occasionally to geniuses (Brentano 1995a: 106). However, what he says here anticipates clearly enough the view presented in *The Genius*. He claims that the genius issue should not be invoked by the defenders of unconscious mental phenomena, because geniuses are rare, and their analysis cannot be considered scientifically well grounded. In any case, the work of brilliant scientists such as Newton, for example, cannot be conceived as a result of unconscious thinking. Moreover, even the genius artists confess that the distinction between them and common artists is not essential but gradual. From this perspective, one could say that *The Genius* complements the analysis in the *Psychology*, because in *The Genius* Brentano *demonstrates* that even the creative activity of geniuses does not involve unconscious mental phenomena. In the *Psychology*, the thesis was only stated but not argued for.

Throughout *The Genius*, Brentano argues for the gradualness thesis starting from cases of genius scientists such as Newton. Unlike common scientists, they have the ability for

assiduous and abiding reflection on the topics they are concerned with and for combining ideas at a higher level than the usual. These features support the gradualness thesis. Against this background, Brentano refers to the fact that in the *Critique of Judgment* Kant explicitly argues for the same view (without specifying, however, that Kant does not use the word “genius” with reference to scientists but limits its use to the realm of art). With respect to *artists of genius*, however, Kant maintained a thesis opposite to Brentano’s: that the distinction between their work and that of common artists is not gradual but essential (Kant 2000: 187–8, Brentano 1959: 90–3; see also Brentano 1987a: 303).

Brentano defines the goal of his research in opposition to the Kantian view:

In any case, in the realm of art it is worth trying to conceive genius work so that it could be comprehended on the ground of general psychological laws, and that the difference between it and the work of a common artist would be only a gradual, and not an essential one. Only this can be considered an actual explanation in the spirit of natural science (*Naturerklärung*), a reduction of the particular case to the general laws.

(Brentano 1959: 97–8; my translation)

Unlike Dilthey, who claimed that the methodology used by the human sciences to explain their object has to be different from that of the natural sciences (Dilthey 1991: 56–72, 78–9), Brentano believes that both sets of sciences should be guided by the same methodological rule: the reduction of the individual case, in this case the creation of the genius artist, to the general laws, psychological ones in this case, to which it subordinates.

To argue for his gradualness thesis in the realm of art, Brentano assumes Aristotle’s theory of art as mimesis and distinguishes between two categories of artwork, depending on the mental faculties involved in their creation: works of art created directly from nature, based on memory and perception; and works of art produced by the artist’s creative fantasy (Brentano 1959: 98–9).

With respect to the first category, artists of genius are characterized by a particular sensitivity to what is aesthetically valuable. This sensitivity allows them to easily accomplish what Brentano calls *aesthetical abstraction*: to grasp in a glance the typical, the aesthetically significant in what is observed. The result of this apprehension is then safely and spontaneously transposed into an artwork that reveals the implicit beauty, unnoticed by a common regard, from what is observed. Although Brentano acknowledges that the spontaneity and the ease with which geniuses produce their works could be seen as a result of inspiration or of unconscious thinking, he insists that the differences between the activities of the two types of artist can be conceived as gradual. His main argument is: the particular *sensitivity* of the creative genius for what is aesthetically significant is not essentially different from that of the common artist but merely a superior development of the common artistic sensitivity (1959: 102–8).

Unlike artworks created by nature, where the artist extracts and gives expression to the aesthetic beauty inherent in nature, artworks produced by creative fantasy are a fundamentally different thing. Here, we are no longer dealing with a pre-existing natural beauty to which the artist gives aesthetic expression, but beauty is produced by the creative imagination of the artist. Things are happening here “as if a superior hand would leave a gift to fall in the artist’s lap.” Kant, emphasizes Brentano, had in mind exactly this

when claiming that the word “genius” refers to “the genius of the artist who attends him, allowing him, by its divine power ... to achieve perfection” (1959: 107; my translation; see also Kant 2000: 187). Brentano explains this form of artistic creation as well by resorting to the particular sensitivity of genius for what is aesthetically valuable. This sensitivity is manifested through the genius’s creative fantasy, which constantly develops and produces artistic images in a fully accomplished aesthetic way (Brentano 1959: 107–14). The explanation in the spirit of natural science mentioned above—which aimed at reducing the individual, unique case of brilliant creation to general psychological laws—takes into account the fact that creative fantasy produces its artistic images following the laws of a fundamental class of psychological phenomena, namely, that of presentations (1959: 111–15). In other words, for Brentano, the activity of the creative fantasy constitutes only a particular case of application of general psychological laws.

Brentano’s solution is a democratic one: both geniuses and common talents have the same kinds of skill, though not at the same development level, and their creative activity is subject to the same general psychological laws. There is no unconscious creation or thought special to genius. The distinction between the two categories of artists is thus overstated by assuming an essential difference where, in fact, there is only a gradual difference (Brentano 1959: 119).

In *The Genius*, Brentano provides a general characterization of the creative fantasy presentation that can be reduced to the intuitive, aesthetically accomplished character of its content. Since the fantasy presentation is addressed extensively in the lectures of 1885–6, it has been considered that this analysis was intended to clarify more precisely the fantasy presentation of the creative genius. This is one of the reasons why Mayer-Hillebrand put these two texts together in the first section of *Grundzüge der Ästhetik*. Experts have not questioned this assumption. At the same time, when not avoiding the issue, they deplored the lack of clarity of the expression “fantasy presentation” in those lectures, where Brentano speaks not of intuitive presentations of fantasy but of improper unintuitive presentations of it, conceived as *concepts with intuitive core* (Brentano 1959: vii, 83; Haller 1994, Allesch 1989). Preliminarily, it is worth noticing that the text of the lectures was not intended for publication, as *The Genius* was, and that Brentano has never held the course again. For this reason, his analysis does not have the character of a fully developed solution, but that of a well-articulated hypothesis designed from the outset to explain certain subclasses of psychological phenomena. Accordingly, both the editor and the exegetics have started from a false premise—that the role of Brentano’s 1885–6 analysis was to explain the presentation of creative fantasy, whereas, as Brentano explicitly claims, its role was to clarify the nature of fantasy presentation as an ordinary psychological phenomenon in relation to sensory presentation (Brentano 1959: 43–5).

Brentano’s fundamental idea is that both the common and the philosophical conceptions (Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes) have misconstrued the nature of this presentation, for they conceived it based on the model of sensory presentation, that is, as a presentation in the proper sense, an intuitive presentation. In reality, he argues, most cases of fantasy presentations are not intuitive but improper unintuitive presentations, or *concepts with intuitive core* (i.e., concepts obtained from intuitions). On the one hand, by their abstract character, they resemble surrogate presentations, for example the presentations “God” or “unlimited,” whose object cannot be directly viewed (1959: 166–7). On the other hand, Brentano consistently emphasizes their intuitive character, their similarity to sensory

presentations, requiring them to satisfy two conditions: that their improperly presented object could be intuitively presented; and that they could be obtained based on an intuitive presentation of the object—the improper fantasy presentation “red square” can be both illustrated by and obtained from the sensory intuition of a red square.

The fact that the goal of Brentano’s analysis is not aesthetic but *psychological* is clearly shown by the phenomena he attempts to explain. He is not concerned with artistic creation but with the presentation of others’ mental phenomena, of physical phenomena, and of our own mental phenomena as past or future phenomena. When we refer to such phenomena, we cannot present them intuitively and directly, as happens with our own mental phenomena experienced in inner consciousness. Instead, we present them through concepts gained from the direct experience of phenomena similar to those presented. In order to present a certain mental phenomenon, for example someone’s toothache, I do not need to experience now that phenomenon, but only to have once lived such phenomena and to have acquired their concept based on those experiences. In this respect, Brentano argues:

It is impossible to present foreign individuality in a proper sense. That is possible only via ... our own mental phenomena. We speak of fantasy presentation when talking to someone, when looking at someone else’s gestures or contemplating artworks ... The intuitive core of our mental phenomena, similar to foreign mental phenomena, is then subject to a certain conceptual abstraction and determination.

(Brentano 1959: 83; my translation)

This passage emphasizes the role of improper fantasy presentation in normal mental life and in the reception of artwork, but not in artistic creation. In fact, Brentano refers only once to the aesthetic importance of this issue, when arguing that a presentation satisfies mostly the conditions of fantasy presentation as it becomes so close to intuitive presentation as to cause “certain aesthetic experiences” similar to those caused by intuitive presentations. The idea is not further developed in the course, but is based on other texts we can assume that these experiences consist of associated images and pleasant emotional states caused by concepts with intuitive core (1959: 160, 219).²

With respect to Brentano’s analysis on fantasy presentation in his published works, the analysis of the 1885–6 lectures is an exception, for Brentano never analyzed fantasy presentation as a concept with intuitive core but usually approached it as intuitive (Brentano 1995a: 80, 1995b: 107). At the same time, the 1885–6 lectures were attended by Husserl and constituted the direct starting point of Husserl’s analysis in “Phantasy and Image Consciousness,” the third part of his lectures “Principal Parts of the Phenomenology and Theory of Knowledge” (WS 1904/5). Unlike contemporary exegesis, Husserl knew exactly what presentations with intuitive core were for Brentano. He did not pursue, however, the path of Brentano’s analysis, but approached fantasy presentation at an intuitive level (Husserl 2005: 1–115).

It must be said that Brentano’s thesis of the gradual difference between genius and common artist does not constitute an original standpoint in the history of the issue. However, his argument for the view is original, namely through his empirical psychology. In this way, his statements on the nature of the work of brilliant artists become relevant to the program of his empirical psychology, since they appear as a development of the

arguments in the *Psychology* against the existence of unconscious mental phenomena. In any case, the genius issue constitutes an episodic topic of his thought addressed by him only in the 1892 paper, one that Brentano did not resume afterwards. Unlike his research devoted to psychology or foundation of ethics, this theme was not inherited nor developed by any of his students.³

NOTES

1. References in this chapter will be to the 1988 edition from Meiner.
2. Although Brentano does not use the last phrase in a paper on art classification published posthumously, however, the fact that he considers there poetry as “the most spiritual” of arts (for it operates with words as *signs evoking concepts*) indicates a possible aesthetic utilisation of concepts with intuitive core. Given the fragmented and disparate character of his analysis, this path is a mere suggestion (Brentano 1959: 211, 217–9; on these issues see extensively Tănăsescu 2011).
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