

AFTER BRENTANO, BEYOND HUSSERL: CRITICAL REALISM AND THE ONTOLOGICAL STATUS OF THE INTENTIONAL OBJECT IN THEORETICAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Received: 17.08.2024. Approved: 12.11.2024.

Review Scientific Article

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.65932/CR-2024-1-5>

UDC: 111.1:159.9.01

Abstract: This article reopens an old question with new tools. What is the ontological status of the intentional object, once we accept neither Brentano's reading of mental directedness as the immanent in-existence of an object nor Husserl's relocation of that object into the ideal correlate of an act? The recent revival of Brentano scholarship has shown that the standard immanentist picture rests on a misattribution, while contemporary work on phenomenal intentionality, nonexistent objects, and naturalised content has multiplied positions without supplying theoretical psychology with a usable ontology of aboutness. The analysis develops a single original contribution: a framework I call stratified intentional realism, which transposes the Brentano–Husserl problematic into the stratified ontology of critical realism—the distinction between the intransitive and transitive dimensions of inquiry and the domains of the real, the actual, and the empirical. On this account the intentional object is neither an intramental particular nor a mind-independent thing but a transitive-dimension relational structure: real because it is causally relevant within psychological generative mechanisms, yet non-substantial because it carries no existence commitment regarding its relatum. A two-axis typology classifies nine post-Brentanian positions by ontological locus and by whether directedness is construed transitively or intransitively. Applied to theoretical psychology, the framework dissolves three standing problems—the reification of mental representations, the realism–antirealism split over content, and the disciplinary fragmentation diagnosed by realist metatheorists. The method is conceptual and comparative, drawing on primary sources and on the 2019–2023 literature. The principal limitation is that the framework is defended analytically rather than through empirical modelling, and its causal-relevance claim awaits operationalisation.

Keywords: *intentionality, intentional object, Brentano, Husserl, critical realism, theoretical psychology, mental representation, stratified ontology.*

INTRODUCTION

Few notions have travelled as far on as little agreement as the intentional object. Brentano reintroduced intentionality in 1874 as the feature that demarcates the mental from the physical, writing that every mental phenomenon is characterised by what the Scholastics called the intentional in-existence of an object and by a direction toward an object (Brentano, 1874/1995). The phrase has proven almost infinitely interpretable. Read one way, it says that whenever we think, the thing thought of is somehow contained in the act; read another, it says only that thinking is constitutively of something, with the grammatical “object” carrying no ontological freight. The first reading underwrites a long tradition of treating intentional objects as immanent mental entities; the second has been recovered, with considerable philological care, by a wave of scholarship over the last several

years (Leung, 2021; Kriegel, 2018; Textor, 2017; Montague, 2023; Fréchette & Taieb, 2023). My starting point is that the choice between these readings is not merely exegetical. It fixes what kind of thing a psychologist is committed to when she says a subject represents, perceives, fears, or desires something.

Husserl, who had heard Brentano lecture, found the immanentist construal untenable and rebuilt the theory around the noema, the object precisely as it is intended, an ideal correlate of the act rather than a part of it (Husserl, 1900–1901/2001; Smith & McIntyre, 1982). This move bought clarity at a price. The noema is neither the worldly thing nor a mental ingredient, and decades of commentary have not settled whether Husserl’s mature position is a realism, an idealism, or something that the dichotomy fails to capture (Zahavi, 2017; Smith, 2021; Yoshimi, 2016). Between Brentano’s nonexistent object and Husserl’s ideal correlate, theoretical psychology inherited a problem it has never resolved and mostly stopped naming: when a science of mind quantifies over what its subjects are directed at, what exactly is being quantified over?

The contemporary literature has not so much answered this question as fragmented it. Crane treats the intentional object as schematic—to be an intentional object is simply to be what some act is directed upon, and “object” here names no category of entity (Crane, 2001; Crane, 2013). Neo-Meinongians answer that some objects of thought are genuine nonexistent items with properties (Priest, 2016; Parsons, 1980). The phenomenal-intentionality programme grounds aboutness in the felt character of experience (Mendelovici, 2018; Bourget & Mendelovici, 2019), and its critics ask whether what it isolates deserves the name intentionality at all (Sacchi, 2022; Voltolini, 2022b). Enactivists deny that basic minds traffic in content in the first place (Hutto & Myin, 2017). Each position carries an implicit ontology of the intentional object, yet these ontologies are rarely laid side by side, and almost never against the resources of philosophy of science. That omission is the gap this article addresses.

The timing is not accidental. Two developments have converged. On one side, a decade of meticulous Brentano scholarship has dismantled the immanentist caricature and reopened the question of what the intentional object could be (Leung, 2021; Kriegel, 2018; Fréchette & Taieb, 2023). On the other, psychology’s reckoning with its own foundations—provoked by replication and measurement controversies—has pushed realist metatheory back onto the agenda (Hibberd & Petocz, 2023). The two conversations have proceeded largely in mutual ignorance. Bringing them together is overdue, and the intentional object, which belongs to both, is a natural place to begin.

The central research question is therefore the following: what ontological status should be assigned to the intentional object so that it is adequate both to the post-Brentanian philosophical debate and to the explanatory practice of theoretical psychology? Around this question I organise three hypotheses. The first holds that the apparent dilemma between Brentanian immanentism and Husserlian correlationism is a false dichotomy produced by an unstratified, “flat” ontology, and that the dilemma dissolves once the object is located within a stratified ontology. The second holds that the status proper to the intentional object is that of a transitive-dimension relational structure—real and causally relevant in psychological explanation, but neither a substance nor a mind-independent particular. The third holds that adopting this account does explanatory work: it dissolves the reification of mental representations, the realism–antirealism split over content, and the disciplinary fragmentation that realist metatheorists have diagnosed in psychology (Hibberd & Petocz, 2023), more economically than its immanentist or eliminativist rivals.

The original contribution of this article lies in constructing, for the first time so far as I have been able to determine, a framework that maps the intentional object onto the stratified ontology of critical realism—a framework I name stratified intentional realism. The proposal has two components. The first is a positive thesis: directedness is a real relational structure operative in what Bhaskar called the transitive dimension of inquiry, and the intentional object is the structural pole of that relation, individuated by content yet committing us to no existing relatum (Bhaskar, 1975/2008; Bhaskar, 2020). The second is a classificatory instrument: a two-axis typology that sorts post-Brentanian

positions by where they locate the object across the strata of the real, and by whether they read directedness transitively or intransitively. I should say at the outset that I approach the question from the side of theoretical psychology and philosophy of science rather than from Husserl philology, and that bias will be visible in what I choose to emphasise.

The argument proceeds as follows. The next part reviews the literature thematically and states the method. A dedicated results part presents the comparative findings, including the typology and the strata mapping. Three analytical parts then reconstruct the immanence problem in Brentano, the limits of Husserlian correlationism, and the positive framework, before a final part applies the framework to three problems in theoretical psychology. The conclusion returns to the hypotheses and is candid about what the analysis does not establish.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

Literature Review

The literature relevant here falls into four currents that rarely cite one another, and part of my task is to put them in the same room. The first is the philological recovery of what Brentano actually held. For most of the twentieth century the textbook Brentano was an immanentist who lodged the object inside the act, a reading transmitted largely through his students rather than his own texts. Leung has argued in detail that this prevalent account derives from Twardowski and Husserl and that Brentano himself supplies guidelines for an objective, deflationary reading of mental in-existence on which the immanent object is not an intramental entity (Leung, 2021). Kriegel's reconstruction of Brentano's system reads the mature Brentano as a reist who, by 1904, admits into his ontology only real things and repudiates the irrealia that an immanent-object reading would require (Kriegel, 2018). Textor presses the interpretation further, and the exchange around his book in a 2023 symposium—with replies and counter-replies—has refined just how much ontological weight Brentano's talk of objects can bear (Textor, 2023; Kriegel, 2023; Taieb, 2023). Fréchette and Taieb, introducing that body of work, frame descriptive psychology as a live project rather than a museum piece (Fréchette & Taieb, 2023), while Montague reconstructs the late doctrine of intentional modes—the in recto and in obliquo distinctions—as Brentano's own attempt to handle relational directedness without reifying its terminus (Montague, 2023), an attempt continuous with her broader account of how experience presents its content (Montague, 2016). The scope of this revival is best surveyed in the recent handbook of the Brentano school, which collects the philological and systematic work in one place (Kriegel, 2017). Taieb's recovery of the Scholastic background, including the first/second-intention distinction Brentano borrowed, shows how much of the supposed novelty of intentional inexistence is inherited machinery (Taieb, 2022; Taieb, 2018).

The second current concerns the immediate post-Brentanian split over content and object. Twardowski's 1894 monograph separated the act, its content, and its object, allowing the object to be transcendent and even nonexistent while the content remains an immanent feature of the presentation (Twardowski, 1894/1977). Plotka traces how this trichotomy seeded the methodological controversy that runs from psychology into phenomenology in the school of Twardowski, a controversy about whether the study of presentations is empirical-psychological or eidetic (Plotka, 2020). Albertazzi's reading of Brentano as an "immanent realist" (Albertazzi, 2006) and Chrudzimski's reconstruction of the early intentionality theory (Chrudzimski, 2001) supply the scholarly backdrop, while Rollinger situates Husserl's departures within the school (Rollinger, 1999; Smith, 1994). What this current establishes is that the content/object distinction, not the bare notion of directedness, is where the ontological pressure concentrates.

The third current is the analytic theory of intentional objects and intentionalia. Crane's deflationism—"object" as a placeholder for whatever an act is about, with no commitment to a kind of entity—remains the most economical option and the one I take most seriously (Crane, 2013). Against it stand truthmaker and Meinongian arguments that thought about the nonexistent requires

nonexistent objects as genuine items (Priest, 2016; Parsons, 1980), and fictionalist treatments that grant the discourse without the entities (Sainsbury, 2010; Thomasson, 2015). Voltolini occupies a middle position on which intentionalia are objects only relative to a subject and stand in a peculiar relation that is neither full-blooded nor eliminable (Voltolini, 2022a), and his earlier critique exposes tensions in any view that tries to read aboutness directly off phenomenology (Voltolini, 2022b). Gow defends a non-relational, adverbial reading of intentional inexistence on which the appearance of an object is an artefact of how experience is structured rather than evidence of a relatum (Gow, 2023). Thomasson's deflationary metaontology, on which existence questions are answered easily once application conditions are fixed, lurks behind several of these moves (Thomasson, 2007).

The fourth current carries the dispute into the phenomenal and the naturalistic. The phenomenal-intentionality programme holds that the most basic kind of aboutness is constituted by phenomenal character (Mendelovici, 2018; Bourget & Mendelovici, 2019), and Smith's work links this to the Brentanian and Husserlian inheritance through a structure of inner awareness and a "constitutive realism" about the given (Smith, 2021; Smith, 2023). Sacchi asks pointedly whether so-called phenomenal intentionality is real intentionality, given that it seems to drop the directedness that defined the phenomenon (Sacchi, 2022). On the naturalistic flank, van Hateren constructs intentionality from an evolutionary fitness-estimating mechanism that can point to the mistaken or the nonexistent (van Hateren, 2021), while the editors of a recent collection map the space of options for what mental representations could be and whether a single account can be both general and naturalistic (Smortchkova, Dolega, & Schlicht, 2020). Enactivists, finally, deny content to basic minds altogether and so deny that there is any intentional object to place (Hutto & Myin, 2017). Running underneath all four currents, and connecting to theoretical psychology, is the realist metatheory associated with Bhaskar (Bhaskar, 1975/2008; Bhaskar, 1979/2015), its extension to persons (Bhaskar, 2020), its application within psychology (Booker, 2021; Pilgrim, 2020), and the realist diagnosis of psychology's disciplinary fragmentation offered by Hibberd and Petocz (Hibberd & Petocz, 2023). To my knowledge no one has yet used the critical-realist apparatus to adjudicate the ontology of the intentional object, and that is the opening I exploit.

A fifth body of work, less often brought into contact with the first four, supplies the disciplinary motivation. Realist philosophers of psychology have argued for decades that the field's recurring crises—of replication, of measurement, of theoretical coherence—trace to unexamined metaphysical commitments rather than to merely technical failings (Hibberd & Petocz, 2023). Bhaskar's extension of critical realism to the ontology of persons insists that human beings possess real, irreducible causal powers, including the power to act for reasons (Bhaskar, 2020), and applications within psychology have reconstrued constructs such as self-efficacy as real generative capacities rather than statistical artefacts (Booker, 2021; Pilgrim, 2020). The aboutness of mental states sits at the centre of this programme without having received an ontology adequate to it; a realism about persons that cannot say what its persons are directed at is incomplete. That incompleteness is part of what motivates the present construction, and it is why I treat the philosophical and the psychological literatures as one problem rather than two.

Research Methodology

The investigation is conceptual and comparative rather than empirical, and it is worth being explicit about what that involves. The first methodological component is textual reconstruction: I read Brentano, Husserl, and Twardowski through the lens of the recent scholarship that has revised the received picture, treating the 2019–2023 articles as the authoritative guide to what the primary texts can and cannot be made to say. The second component is conceptual mapping. I isolate two parameters along which any theory of the intentional object can be located—its ontological locus and its construal of directedness—and use them to build a typology that makes the logical space surveyable rather than merely enumerated. I chose these two parameters, rather than the more familiar

realist/antirealist axis alone, because the single-axis framing is precisely what generates the false dilemma I want to diagnose; a second axis is needed to show why.

The third component is the constructive transposition that yields the framework. I import three distinctions from critical realism—the intransitive versus transitive dimensions of inquiry, the stratification of reality into the domains of the real, the actual, and the empirical, and the notion of a non-actualised causal power—and ask where the intentional object falls once those distinctions are in place (Bhaskar, 1975/2008). The transposition is defended by its fruits: by whether it preserves the genuine insights of the rival positions while avoiding their characteristic costs. The fourth component is application. A framework in theoretical psychology earns its keep only if it does work on standing problems, so I test stratified intentional realism against three of them—representational reification, the content realism debate, and disciplinary fragmentation—and ask in each case whether it improves on the alternatives. Sources were restricted to verifiable items, with journal articles drawn from the 2019–2023 window and each digital object identifier checked against the publisher record; foundational monographs of earlier date are cited where the relevant claim has no adequate recent surrogate. The limitations of this design are addressed in the conclusion, not least the fact that a single researcher’s conceptual choices are not checked by any external coding procedure.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The comparative analysis generated findings that can be organised into three blocks corresponding to the three hypotheses. The first block concerns the structure of the logical space; the second states the positive characterisation of the intentional object that the framework yields; the third records the framework’s performance against the three target problems in theoretical psychology. I present these findings here without interpretation, reserving the argumentative defence for the analytical parts that follow.

The first finding is that the positions in the literature do not array along a single realist–antirealist line but occupy a two-dimensional space. One dimension is the ontological locus assigned to the intentional object: intramental particular, ideal correlate, transcendent existent, nonexistent-but-real item, or no entity at all. The second dimension is the construal of directedness: transitive, where aboutness is relative to a knowing act and carries no existence commitment, or intransitive, where the relation requires a mind-independent relatum. When the nine canonical positions are placed in this space, they distribute across both dimensions rather than clustering, which is the result predicted by the first hypothesis and incompatible with the single-axis framing. Table 1 records the classification.

Position	Ontological locus	Directedness
Early Brentano (received reading)	Intramental particular (immanent object)	Quasi-intransitive (relation to in-existent)
Mature Brentano (reism)	No special entity; only res	Modal, in obliquo (Montague, 2023)
Twardowski	Transcendent object; immanent content	Intransitive (object) + transitive (content)
Husserl (noema)	Ideal correlate of the act	Transitive (constituted directedness)
Meinong / neo-Meinong	Nonexistent yet genuine item	Intransitive (relation to nonexistent)
Crane (deflationism)	No category of entity	Transitive (schematic aboutness)
Phenomenal intentionality	Phenomenal content; object derivative	Transitive, consciousness-first
Radical enactivism	None (basic minds are contentless)	Neither (ur-directedness only)
Stratified intentional realism	Transitive-dimension structure	Transitive, causally relevant

Table 1. Two-axis classification of post-Brentanian positions on the intentional object. *Source: author’s construction, drawing on the sources reviewed.*

The second finding is the positive characterisation that emerges once the framework is in place. The intentional object is identified as a transitive-dimension relational structure: it belongs to the dimension of cognitive access rather than to the mind-independent furniture of the world, it is individuated by the content of the act, and it functions as the structural terminus of directedness without thereby being an existing entity. Mapped onto the three domains of the stratified ontology, the elements of an intentional episode separate cleanly. The vehicle of representation—the neural or functional state—belongs to the actual and is detectable in the empirical; the generative power to be directed belongs to the real and need not be exercised to be possessed; the intentional object is the transitive structure through which that power is specified. Table 2 records the mapping, which is the result the second hypothesis requires.

Stratum / dimension	Occupant	Status for psychology
The real (intransitive)	Generative power to be directed	Enduring capacity; need not be actualised
The actual (intransitive)	Representational vehicle / mental act	Event that occurs whether or not observed
The empirical	Measured indicator of the act	What enters data and report
Transitive dimension	The intentional object (as structure)	Content-individuated, causally relevant, non-substantial

Table 2. Elements of an intentional episode mapped onto the stratified ontology. *Source: author’s construction after Bhaskar (1975/2008).*

The third finding concerns explanatory yield. Tested against the reification of mental representations, the framework separates the vehicle from the object and assigns each to a different stratum, so that the question “where in the brain is the represented thing?” is exposed as a category error rather than an open empirical problem—a result consonant with the cautions registered in the survey of what mental representations might be (Smortchkova, Dolega, & Schlicht, 2020). Tested against the realism–antirealism dispute over content, it returns the verdict that content is real in the only sense that matters for an explanatory science—it makes a difference to outcomes—without being a mind-independent particular, which neither eliminativism nor naive content realism can jointly secure (Hutto & Myin, 2017; Mendelovici, 2018). Tested against the disciplinary fragmentation that realist metatheorists describe, it supplies an ontology of aboutness compatible with measurement-oriented psychology and so addresses one root of the fragmentation Hibberd and Petocz identify (Hibberd & Petocz, 2023; Booker, 2021). These three results are stated here as outcomes; the mechanisms behind them are the business of the parts that follow.

THE IMMANENCE PROBLEM AND ITS PSYCHOLOGICAL STAKES

Brentano’s 1874 formulation is the source of the trouble, and it is worth quoting its structure rather than its slogan. Mental phenomena, he says, are distinguished by their relation to a content, a direction toward an object, where “object” is not to be understood as a reality (Brentano, 1874/1995). The qualification—not to be understood as a reality—is the part the tradition forgot. Read with it, the text does not say that a little replica of the thing thought of sits inside the mind; it says that being directed is a way of being characterised that does not import its terminus into the act. The received immanentist reading, on which the object is an intramental particular, was largely the work of readers who needed a target. Leung’s reconstruction shows that the locative interpretation—the object as literally in the head—and the inherentist interpretation—the object as a property of the act—both

fail against Brentano's own distinctions, and that an objective, deflationary reading fits the texts best (Leung, 2021). I find this case persuasive, and the rest of my argument assumes it.

Why did the immanentist reading take hold? Part of the answer is that Brentano's first readers were solving their own problems. Twardowski needed the object to be distinct from the content precisely so that one could think about what does not exist without there being something nonexistent inside the mind, and his act–content–object trichotomy did exactly that work (Twardowski, 1894/1977; Plotka, 2020). The cost was a population explosion: every presentation now has a content that is real and immanent and an object that may be transcendent or may not exist, and the relation between these came to define a research programme. Husserl inherited the problem and dissolved the immanent object into the noematic Sinn, but only by introducing a new entity whose ontological status is itself contested (Smith & McIntyre, 1982). The lesson I draw is that the immanence problem is not a confusion to be cleared away once and discarded; it is a structural pressure that any theory of directedness must manage, because the alternative to managing it is either to reify the object or to lose the aboutness.

A contemporary echo of the same manoeuvre deserves notice, since it shows that the immanence problem is no period curiosity. Gow has revived a non-relational, adverbial reading on which what looks like a relation to an inner object is better described as the act's occurring in a certain manner—seeing redly, in the old idiom—so that the apparent object is an artefact of how we describe the experience rather than evidence of a relatum (Gow, 2023). I am sympathetic to the diagnostic impulse and unpersuaded by the cure. Adverbialism keeps the object out of the mind, which is the real gain, but at the cost of making it hard to say that two subjects are directed at the same thing, since adverbs modify acts severally and supply no common terminus. The difficulty mirrors reism's exactly: where reism loses the shared nonexistent object by paraphrase, adverbialism loses it by dispersion into manners of acting. Both confirm the lesson I am pressing—that the object cannot simply be deleted without explanatory loss—and both leave the positive task untouched.

The mature Brentano managed it by retreating to reism. By 1904 he held that one can only think of things, of res, and that apparent reference to irrealia—to contents, states of affairs, lacks, and the like—must be paraphrased away in favour of modes of thinking about real things (Kriegel, 2018). Montague's reconstruction of the late theory shows the machinery: the *in recto* and *in obliquo* modes let Brentano say that when I think of a centaur I think, in obliquo, of really existing things combined in a certain way, so that no nonexistent object need be posited as the terminus (Montague, 2023). This is an elegant deflation, and it anticipates Crane's twentieth-century version more than is usually noticed. But it purchases ontological hygiene at the cost of psychological adequacy. Reism makes it hard to say what is common to two subjects who both fear the same nonexistent threat, because the modes are individuated by their real relata and the threat has none. Taieb's analysis of how Brentano tried to divide a single mind into parts without multiplying entities shows the strain the reist programme is under when it meets the actual complexity of mental life (Taieb, 2023).

The recovery literature has also clarified what is genuinely Brentanian in the contemporary phenomenal-intentionality programme. Smith reconstructs a structure of inner awareness running from Brentano onward, on which every act carries a secondary consciousness of itself, and argues that this structure is what grounds the givenness of the object (Smith, 2021; Smith, 2023). Sacchi's worry bites here: if phenomenal intentionality is defined by phenomenal character and the object is whatever that character presents, the danger is that directedness—the very thing Brentano made central—drops out, replaced by a monadic felt quality that is intentional in name only (Sacchi, 2022). Voltolini sharpens the same point from the side of perception, arguing that reading aboutness directly off phenomenology generates more trouble than it resolves (Voltolini, 2022b). I take these criticisms to show that a theory which locates the object in phenomenal character has not escaped the immanence problem; it has relocated it from the act to the quale.

For theoretical psychology the stakes are concrete, and this is where my disciplinary angle shows. When a clinical or cognitive psychologist writes that a patient's anxiety is directed at a feared

catastrophe that will not occur, the immanentist reading invites the question of where that catastrophe is stored, and the eliminativist reading invites the denial that there is anything the anxiety is about. Neither is acceptable. The first reifies a fiction into a mental object; the second throws away the explanandum, since the whole point of the clinical description is that the anxiety has that object and not another. The descriptive-psychological tradition that Fréchette and Taieb describe as a living project was built precisely to characterise such directedness faithfully, without prejudging its metaphysics (Fréchette & Taieb, 2023). What that tradition lacked, and what the next parts supply, is an ontology general enough to say how the feared catastrophe can be real for explanation without being real in the world or real in the head.

HUSSERL'S NOEMA AND THE LIMITS OF CORRELATIONISM

Husserl's response to the immanence problem was to bracket the question of the worldly object's existence and to study the object purely as intended, the noema correlated with the noetic act (Husserl, 1913/1983). The noema is not the tree but the tree-as-perceived, and it is neither a part of the act nor identical with the worldly tree. This is a genuine advance over the immanentist picture, because it refuses to put the object inside the mind while preserving the structure of directedness. The interpretive industry that grew around Føllesdal's reading of the noema as a generalised Fregean sense—an abstract, mediating meaning—testifies to how much theoretical work the notion was asked to do (Smith & McIntyre, 1982). My interest is not in adjudicating that interpretive dispute but in extracting what survives it for a theory of the intentional object.

What survives is the idea of correlation: object and act are given together, neither intelligible without the other, so that to specify the object is to specify it as the correlate of a certain kind of act. Zahavi argues that Husserl's mature transcendental idealism is not the denial of a mind-independent world but a thesis about the necessary correlation between being and the possibility of its disclosure (Zahavi, 2017). Yoshimi reconstructs the constitutive machinery whereby an object is built up as an invariant across a manifold of actual and possible experiences (Yoshimi, 2016). Smith goes furthest in the realist direction, defending a “constitutive realism” on which the constituted object is nonetheless a real object, given in but not created by the act (Smith, 2021). I find the correlation thesis indispensable and the idealist gloss avoidable, and the framework I build keeps the former while discarding the latter.

The limit of correlationism, for present purposes, is that it leaves the ontological status of the noema underdetermined. If the noema is an abstract sense, it is a denizen of a Platonic third realm, and the psychologist who quantifies over it acquires commitments she has no way to discharge. If the noema is just the worldly object considered under an aspect, then correlationism collapses back toward a realism that cannot handle the nonexistent, since there is no worldly object to consider when the catastrophe will not occur. The dilemma is the same one that defeated the immanentist reading, displaced to a new level. This is the textual situation that the idealism–realism debate in the phenomenological movement never resolved, and I read its persistence as evidence that the resources internal to phenomenology are insufficient to fix the status of the correlate (Rollinger, 1999; Smith, 1994).

Smith's constitutive realism is the position closest to my own, and the distance between us is instructive. He holds that the object is constituted in the act yet is a real object, given rather than manufactured, and he grounds this in a structure of inner awareness inherited from Brentano (Smith, 2021; Smith, 2023). I accept the phenomenological description and decline the metaphysical packaging. What Smith calls constitution I would redescribe as the act's deployment of a transitive structure; what he treats as the reality of the constituted object I would relocate to the reality of that structure within the transitive dimension. The redescription is not idle. It severs the realist claim from any residual idealism—there is no suggestion that constitution makes the worldly object—because the transitive dimension is, by construction, the dimension of access rather than of worldly being.

Whether Smith would accept the redescription I cannot say; the point is only that the phenomenological yield he documents does not require the constitutive idiom to be preserved.

There is a further difficulty that the recent literature on directedness throws into relief. Husserlian correlation is symmetric in a way that aboutness is not. My thought reaches the catastrophe, but the catastrophe does not reach back; the relation is, as the medievals saw and as Taieb documents in his study of relational intentionality, a relation “from one side only”, an *esse ad* without a reciprocal *esse in* (Taieb, 2018; Taieb, 2022). A theory built on correlation tends to treat the object as a full partner in a mutual relation, which over-dignifies its ontological standing. The deflationists are right that “object” here does not name a partner; Crane’s schematic reading captures the asymmetry better than the noema does (Crane, 2013). Yet the deflationists, in turn, leave us with too little: if the object is nothing at all, we cannot explain why being directed at this object rather than that one makes a systematic difference to a subject’s behaviour, which is exactly what a psychological science needs to explain.

So the dialectic reaches an impasse that I want to state precisely, because the framework is designed to break it. Immanentism makes the object too much—an entity in the mind. Naive realism and strong correlationism make it too much in a different way—a worldly partner or an abstract sense. Deflationism and eliminativism make it too little—nothing, or a mere grammatical shadow. Each horn is a response to a real constraint: the object must not be in the head, must not require an existing relatum, and must not vanish, since it does explanatory work. Stated as a list of constraints rather than as a forced choice among entities, the problem begins to look tractable. What is needed is a category for something that is real-for-explanation, content-individuated, and non-substantial. Critical realism, I shall argue, already has that category, though it was developed for a different purpose.

A STRATIFIED REALIST RECONSTRUCTION OF THE INTENTIONAL OBJECT

Critical realism distinguishes two dimensions of any inquiry. The intransitive dimension comprises the objects of knowledge—the structures, mechanisms, and events that exist and act independently of our investigation of them. The transitive dimension comprises the means of knowledge—the concepts, models, and representational structures through which we gain cognitive access to the intransitive (Bhaskar, 1975/2008). The cardinal error that critical realism diagnoses, the “epistemic fallacy”, is to collapse questions about being into questions about our knowledge of being. My proposal turns on noticing that the intentional object has been mislocated precisely because this distinction was unavailable to the disputants. The intentional object is not an inhabitant of the intransitive dimension at all. It is a structure within the transitive dimension—and once it is placed there, the constraints that generated the impasse are jointly satisfiable.

The historical diagnosis follows immediately. Brentano, Twardowski, and Husserl all worked before the transitive–intransitive distinction had been articulated, and so were compelled to ask a single question—where, among the things that exist, does the intentional object belong?—that the distinction shows to be malformed. Confronted with that question, every available answer is bad: in the mind, in the world, in a third realm, or nowhere. The mistake is a cousin of what critical realists call the epistemic fallacy, the reduction of questions of being to questions of access; here it runs in reverse, forcing a feature of access to be assigned a place in the inventory of being (Bhaskar, 1975/2008). Seen this way, the long dispute was not a failure of ingenuity but the predictable consequence of a missing distinction, and the framework’s contribution is less an invention than the relocation of a problem into the conceptual space where it admits of solution.

Consider the constraints in turn. The object must not be in the head: satisfied, because the transitive dimension is not a region of the brain but the space of cognitive access, and a structure within it is no more “in the head” than a coordinate system is inside the planet it locates. The object must not require an existing relatum: satisfied, because transitive structures are individuated by their role in access, not by a worldly terminus, so a subject can be directed at a catastrophe that the intransitive dimension does not contain. The object must not vanish: satisfied, because critical realism

is emphatic that the transitive dimension is real—concepts and representational structures are not nothing, they are produced, they persist, and they make a difference. This is the sense in which the view is a realism about the intentional object. It is real, but it is real as a transitive structure, not as an intransitive thing. I call the resulting position stratified intentional realism.

The second distinction does further work. Critical realism stratifies reality into the domain of the real, comprising structures and their causal powers, the domain of the actual, comprising the events those powers produce when exercised, and the domain of the empirical, comprising the subset of events that are observed (Bhaskar, 1975/2008; Bhaskar, 2020). A causal power is real even when it is not being exercised; a soluble substance is soluble in a sealed jar. Applied to an intentional episode, this stratification separates three things the tradition ran together. The capacity to be directed—the standing power of a mind to take objects—lives in the real and need not be exercised to be possessed. The act of being directed on a given occasion, together with its vehicle, lives in the actual. The measured trace of that act lives in the empirical. The intentional object is none of these; it is the transitive structure that specifies which power is being exercised and toward what. Table 2 set out this mapping; here I am giving the argument behind it.

The decisive move is to characterise directedness as a real relational structure rather than as a relation in the ordinary existence-entailing sense. Ordinary relations are existence-entailing: aRb requires both a and b . Brentano already saw that intentional directedness is not like this, which is why he reached for *in-existence* and the medievals for *esse ad* (Taieb, 2018). On my account, directedness is a one-place structuring of the act by a content, and the “object” is the pole that this structuring projects. Projecting a pole is not positing an entity. A vanishing point is projected by the structure of a perspective drawing and is perfectly real as a feature of that structure, yet there is no entity located at the vanishing point. The intentional object is, I suggest, a pole of this kind: a real feature of a transitive structure, individuated by content, with no entity required at the place it marks. This reconciles Crane’s deflationism—there is no category of entity here—with the realist intuition that aboutness is not nothing (Crane, 2013; Voltolini, 2022a).

It helps to see how the framework absorbs the rivals rather than merely opposing them. The phenomenal-intentionality theorist is right that, for conscious episodes, the transitive structure is often given in experience and shaped by phenomenal character; the framework simply denies that phenomenal character is the whole of directedness, which is what Sacchi’s objection requires (Sacchi, 2022; Mendelovici, 2018). The Meinongian is right that we can say true things about Pegasus; the framework explains this as truth about a transitive structure with determinate content, without admitting Pegasus into the intransitive inventory, which is the economy that fictionalists also seek (Priest, 2016; Sainsbury, 2010; Thomasson, 2007). The enactivist is right that the standing capacity to be directed need not, at its most basic, involve explicit content; in the present terms, *ur-directedness* is a real power whose transitive articulation is minimal (Hutto & Myin, 2017). Even the reist Brentano is partly vindicated: there are no intentional objects in the intransitive dimension, exactly as reism insists, which is why the *in obliquo* paraphrase felt compulsory (Kriegel, 2018; Montague, 2023). The framework says reism was right about the intransitive and wrong only to assume that the transitive had to be paraphrased away.

Two clarifications forestall predictable misreadings. First, calling the object a transitive structure does not make it subjective in the pejorative sense. Transitive structures in critical realism are intersubjective, public, and corrigible—a scientific model is transitive yet not a private mental item—so two subjects can be directed at the same intentional object in the robust sense that their acts instantiate the same content-individuated structure. This is what the reist could not easily say. Second, the framework does not naturalise intentionality in the reductive sense; it locates it. Whether the standing power to be directed can itself be given a naturalistic account, in the manner van Hateren attempts with fitness-estimating mechanisms, is a further question the framework leaves open, and I am genuinely uncertain how it will go (van Hateren, 2021). My claim is only that wherever that power

comes from, its objects are transitive structures, and that this is enough to dissolve the impasse the tradition reached.

One objection deserves a direct answer. It might be said that calling the object a transitive structure is too thin to discharge the work the tradition wanted the object to do: to be that which is true or false of, that which two minds share, that which can be misperceived. The structure is thicker than the worry assumes. A transitive structure is individuated by content, and content has the articulation needed to ground truth-evaluability, since to be directed at the cat-on-the-mat is to deploy a structure with constituents and a mode of combination, which is what a satisfaction condition requires. Voltolini's insistence that intentionalia are objects only for a subject, standing in a relation that is real but not full-blooded, points the same way, and his subject-relativity reads naturally as transitivity in my sense (Voltolini, 2022a). Where I part from him is in declining to call the pole an object of any *sui generis* category; on the present view it is not an object at all but the structural terminus of one, and Thomasson's deflationary metaontology gives independent reason to think the existence question, so posed, dissolves rather than demands an exotic answer (Thomasson, 2007; Thomasson, 2015).

It is fair to ask, finally, how the transitive structure differs from the Husserlian noema, given that both are content-individuated correlates that are neither worldly things nor mental ingredients. The difference lies in the surrounding ontology, and so in the bills that come due. The noema sits in a phenomenology that owes an account of its own metaphysical standing and has never settled on one, which is why the idealism–realism question keeps returning (Zahavi, 2017; Rollinger, 1999). The transitive structure sits in a worked-out philosophy of science that already separates the means of knowledge from its objects and already treats the former as real, public, and corrigible (Bhaskar, 1975/2008). Where the noema must be guarded against collapse into either an abstract sense or a worldly aspect, the transitive structure has a stable home from the start. The proposal is therefore not the noema renamed; it is the insight behind the noema—that aboutness is correlative—rehoused in an ontology that can say what the correlate is without lapsing into idealism.

INTENTIONAL OBJECTS AS TRANSITIVE STRUCTURES IN PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLANATION

The framework is meant to do work, so this part puts it to work on three problems that have kept theoretical psychology divided. The first is the reification of mental representations, the tendency to treat the represented object as something the cognitive system literally contains. The collection assembled by Smortchkova, Dołęga, and Schlicht documents how persistent the temptation is and how hard a general, naturalistic account of representation has been to secure (Smortchkova, Dołęga, & Schlicht, 2020). Stratified intentional realism diagnoses the reification as a stratum confusion. The vehicle of representation—the neural or computational state—is an actual occupant that the empirical can in principle detect; the represented object is a transitive structure and is not located anywhere in the intransitive dimension, brain included. The question “where is the represented apple in the visual system?” conflates the vehicle, which is somewhere, with the object, which is not the kind of thing that is anywhere. Once the strata are separated, the so-called representation wars look less like a substantive dispute and more like a failure to keep vehicle and object apart.

The second problem is the realism–antirealism dispute over mental content. Eliminativists and radical enactivists argue that ascriptions of content are at best instrumental and that basic minds are contentless (Hutto & Myin, 2017); content realists insist that contents are genuine properties with determinate conditions of satisfaction (Mendelovici, 2018; Searle, 1983). The framework dissolves the standoff by distinguishing two questions that the disputants run together: whether content is real, and whether content is intransitive. Stratified intentional realism answers yes to the first and no to the second. Content is real because the transitive structure it specifies is causally relevant—being directed at this object rather than that one makes a systematic, exploitable difference to what a subject does, which is the only reality an explanatory science requires of it. Content is not intransitive because the object it picks out is a transitive pole, not a mind-independent particular. The eliminativist was right

that there is no intransitive content-thing to find; the realist was right that content is not a mere fiction. They were both answering the wrong question, and the framework lets each keep the half they had.

The causal-relevance claim deserves a word, because it is where a philosopher of science will press, and rightly. Critical realism allows that transitive structures are causally efficacious: a theory held by an agent shapes the agent's action, and self-efficacy beliefs measurably alter performance, as the critical-realist treatment of agency in psychology has emphasised (Booker, 2021). The directedness of a mental state is causally relevant in the same way—not as an intransitive push but as a structuring that, when instantiated, makes a difference to the trajectory of an open system. This is weaker than saying the intentional object is an efficient cause, and deliberately so; I am claiming relevance within a generative mechanism, not billiard-ball causation. The clinical case makes the point. Two patients with identical physiological arousal but anxieties directed at different objects will behave differently, seek different treatment, and respond differently to it, and the difference tracks the transitive structure, not any intransitive object, since in neither case need the feared object exist.

Developmental psychology furnishes a still sharper illustration, because there the object is often not-yet-real rather than never-real. A child's pretence that a banana is a telephone, or an infant's search for an object that has been hidden, involves directedness at something whose worldly status is precisely what is in flux. An immanentist ontology must store the telephone somewhere; an eliminativist ontology must deny that the pretence is about anything, which renders the systematic structure of pretence unintelligible. On the present account the pretend-telephone is a transitive structure the child deploys—real as a structure, causally implicated in what the child does next—with no commitment to a telephone in the world or in the head. The descriptive task of characterising how the pretence presents its object stays primary, and the framework only tells us what kind of thing that careful description is a description of (Fréchette & Taieb, 2023). I find this the most persuasive single advertisement for the view, though I concede that an anecdote is not yet a model.

The third problem is the one realist metatheorists have made their central complaint: psychology's disciplinary fragmentation. Hibberd and Petocz argue that the field's incoherence is rooted in unexamined and conflicting philosophical commitments, and that a consistent realism is the condition of repair (Hibberd & Petocz, 2023). I think the ontology of aboutness is one node of that incoherence, and a revealing one. A discipline that cannot say what its subjects are directed at will oscillate between a dualism that hides the object in an inner theatre and a behaviourism or eliminativism that denies there is an object at all—and psychology has spent a century oscillating exactly so. Stratified intentional realism offers a single ontology in which directedness is neither inner-theatrical nor eliminable, and which is continuous with the broader critical-realist programme that Bhaskar extended to persons and that Pilgrim and others have brought into psychology (Bhaskar, 2020; Pilgrim, 2020; Booker, 2021). To that extent the framework is not only a thesis about intentional objects; it is a small contribution to the metatheoretical unification those authors call for.

The framework's neutrality toward competing mechanistic theories is worth defending rather than apologising for. Cognitive science offers rival accounts of the vehicle—classical representations, predictive-processing models, enactivist dynamics that dispense with stored content—and partisans of each sometimes write as though settling the vehicle would settle the ontology of the object (Smortchkova, Dołęga, & Schlicht, 2020; Hutto & Myin, 2017). The stratified picture explains why it will not. The vehicle is an intransitive matter, to be settled by whatever cognitive science discovers about actual mechanisms; the object is a transitive matter, fixed by the content the mechanism subserves. A predictive-processing system and a classical system can be directed at the same object precisely because object-individuation does not run through vehicle-individuation. This is not evasion but a division of labour, and it is the division a stratified ontology was built to enforce.

A last application returns to measurement, the locus of psychology's most public crises. If the intentional object is a transitive structure, then what a psychometric instrument targets when it purports to measure, say, the strength of a person's goal-directedness is not an intransitive quantity

lodged in the person but a property of the transitive structures the person deploys—their content, their stability, their role in action. This does not make measurement impossible; it makes its object the right kind of thing, a structured and corrigible feature rather than a hidden inner magnitude, which is closer to what realist critics of psychometrics have urged all along (Hibberd & Petocz, 2023; Booker, 2021). I offer this as a direction rather than a result. Working it out would mean engaging the measurement literature in detail, and that lies beyond what one conceptual article can responsibly attempt.

I want to be careful not to claim too much. The framework does not tell a cognitive scientist which representational vehicles to posit, nor does it settle whether predictive-processing models or enactivist ones better describe the actual mechanisms; those are intransitive questions to be settled empirically, and the framework is deliberately neutral on them. What it does is fix the ontological category of the object so that whichever mechanistic story wins, the aboutness it explains has a stable home. There is also a residual worry I have not fully laid to rest, namely whether the notion of a “transitive structure” is doing real explanatory work or merely relabelling the problem in a more congenial vocabulary. My provisional answer is that the relabelling earns its keep by the three dissolutions just rehearsed, but I would not pretend the matter is closed, and a fuller defence would require the kind of detailed case analysis that a single article cannot carry. Descriptive psychology in Brentano’s sense—careful characterisation of how acts present their objects—remains the indispensable input, and the framework is best read as supplying the ontology that descriptive psychology always needed but never had (Fréchette & Taieb, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The intentional object has been a scandal of theoretical psychology because the field inherited it as a forced choice among bad options: an entity in the mind, an entity in a Platonic heaven, an entity that does not exist but somehow is, or no entity and therefore no aboutness. I have argued that the choice is forced only on a flat ontology, and that it dissolves on a stratified one. The first hypothesis—that the dilemma between Brentanian immanentism and Husserlian correlationism is an artefact of an unstratified ontology—is borne out. The recovery literature shows that even Brentano did not hold the immanentism attributed to him (Leung, 2021; Kriegel, 2018; Montague, 2023), and the persistence of the idealism–realism deadlock in phenomenology shows that correlationism cannot fix the status of the object from its own resources (Zahavi, 2017; Smith, 2021). Once the transitive–intransitive distinction is introduced, immanence and transcendence stop being exhaustive, exactly as the hypothesis predicted.

The second hypothesis—that the intentional object is a transitive-dimension relational structure, real and causally relevant but neither a substance nor a mind-independent particular—is the article’s positive core, and I have defended it by showing that this single characterisation satisfies the three constraints that defeated every entity-based account: it keeps the object out of the head, frees it from any existing relatum, and preserves its explanatory bite. The verdict here is affirmative but qualified. The characterisation is defended analytically, by its capacity to absorb the rivals and to satisfy the constraints, not by an independent criterion of causal relevance, and until that relevance is operationalised the hypothesis is supported rather than demonstrated.

The third hypothesis—that the framework does superior explanatory work in theoretical psychology—is the most consequential and the most exposed. I have shown that stratified intentional realism dissolves the reification of representations as a stratum confusion, reframes the content realism debate by prising apart the real from the intransitive, and offers an ontology of aboutness that speaks to the disciplinary fragmentation realist metatheorists deplore (Smortchkova, Dolega, & Schlicht, 2020; Hibberd & Petocz, 2023; Booker, 2021). Whether it does this better than every rival is not something a single article can establish against all comers; what I claim is that it does so more economically than the immanentist and eliminativist options, because it keeps the insights of both while paying the costs of neither.

The principal original contribution of this article is the framework of stratified intentional realism itself: the transposition of the Brentano–Husserl problematic into the stratified ontology of critical realism, the identification of the intentional object as a transitive-dimension structure rather than an entity of any domain, and the two-axis typology that makes the post-Brentanian logical space surveyable. If the framework is removed, what remains is a survey of positions without a place to stand, and that is the test the introduction set for a genuine contribution.

The limitations are real and worth naming without euphemism. The argument is conceptual throughout, and its central causal-relevance claim is asserted on the strength of clinical and philosophical examples rather than modelled; an adequate follow-up would have to show, in a worked case, how a transitive structure enters a generative mechanism and earns its explanatory place. The treatment of Husserl is frankly partial, written from the side of philosophy of science rather than phenomenology, and a Husserl scholar would want more textual engagement than I have given. The typology covers nine positions but not all—teleosemantic and pure tracking theories, for instance, are gestured at rather than placed—and the framework’s neutrality between mechanistic theories of the vehicle, which I have presented as a virtue, could be pressed as an evasion. Finally, as a single-author conceptual analysis, the work has not been checked by any procedure of intercoder agreement, and its key classificatory choices reflect one set of disciplinary commitments. Future work should operationalise causal relevance, extend the typology to the naturalistic theories left at its margins, and test the framework against detailed cases from clinical and developmental psychology, where directedness at the nonexistent and the not-yet-real is not a philosopher’s puzzle but the ordinary texture of the subject matter.

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NAKON BRENTANA, MIMO HUSSERLA: KRITIČKI REALIZAM I ONTOLOŠKI STATUS INTENCIONALNOG OBJEKTA U TEORIJSKOJ PSIHOLOGIJI

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Primljeno: 17.08.2024. Prihvaćeno: 12.11.2024.

Pregledni naučni članak

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.65932/CR-2024-1-5>

UDK: 111.1:159.9.01

Sažetak: Članak ponovo otvara staro pitanje novim sredstvima: kakav je ontološki status intencionalnog objekta kada više ne prihvatamo ni Brentanovo razumijevanje usmjerenosti uma kao imanentne in-egzistencije objekta, ni Husserlovo izmještanje tog objekta u idealni korelat akta? Savremeni preporod brentanovske egzegeze pokazao je da standardna imanentistička slika počiva na pogrešnoj atribuciji, dok rad o fenomenalnoj intencionalnosti, nepostojećim objektima i naturalizovanom sadržaju umnožava pozicije a teorijskoj psihologiji ne nudi upotrebljivu ontologiju usmjerenosti (aboutness). Analiza razvija jedan originalni doprinos: okvir koji nazivam stratifikovani intencionalni realizam, koji brentanovsko-husserlovsku problematiku prevodi u stratifikovanu ontologiju kritičkog realizma—razliku između intranzitivne i tranzitivne dimenzije saznanja te domena realnog, aktualnog i empirijskog. Prema ovom shvatanju, intencionalni objekt nije ni intramentalni partikular ni od uma nezavisna stvar, nego relaciona struktura tranzitivne dimenzije: realan jer je kauzalno relevantan unutar psiholoških generativnih mehanizama, ali nesupstancijalan jer ne nosi egzistencijalnu obavezu u pogledu svog relata. Tipologija sa dvije ose klasifikuje devet postbrentanovskih pozicija prema ontološkom mjestu i prema tome da li se usmjerenost shvata tranzitivno ili intranzitivno. Primijenjen na teorijsku psihologiju, okvir rastvara tri trajna problema: reifikaciju mentalnih reprezentacija, raskol između realizma i antirealizma o sadržaju, te disciplinarnu fragmentaciju koju dijagnostikuju realistički metateoretičari. Metod je konceptualni i komparativni. Glavno ograničenje je to što je okvir branjen analitički, a ne empirijskim modelovanjem, te što tvrdnja o kauzalnoj relevantnosti tek treba da bude operacionalizovana.

Ključne riječi: *intencionalnost, intencionalni objekt, Brentano, Husserl, kritički realizam, teorijska psihologija, mentalna reprezentacija, stratifikovana ontologija.*