

# What Brentano's empiricism owes to William Hamilton

D. Seron, Liège, 24 Oct. 2015

We have seen what kind of knowledge the natural scientist is able to attain. The phenomena of light, sound, heat, spatial location and locomotion which he studies are not things which really and truly exist. They are signs of something real, which, through its causal activity, produces presentations of them. They are not, however, an adequate representation of this reality, and they give us knowledge of it only in a very incomplete sense. We can say that there exists something which, under certain conditions, causes this or that sensation. We can probably also prove that there must be relations among these realities similar to those which are manifested by spatial phenomena shapes and sizes. But this is as far as we can go. That which truly exists does not come to appearance, and that which appears does not truly exist. The truth of physical phenomena is, as they say, only a relative truth. The phenomena of inner perception are a different matter. They are true in themselves. As they appear to be, so they are in reality, a fact which is attested to by the evidence with which they are perceived. Who could deny, then, that this constitutes a great advantage of psychology over the natural sciences?

F. Brentano, *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt*, p. 28-29.

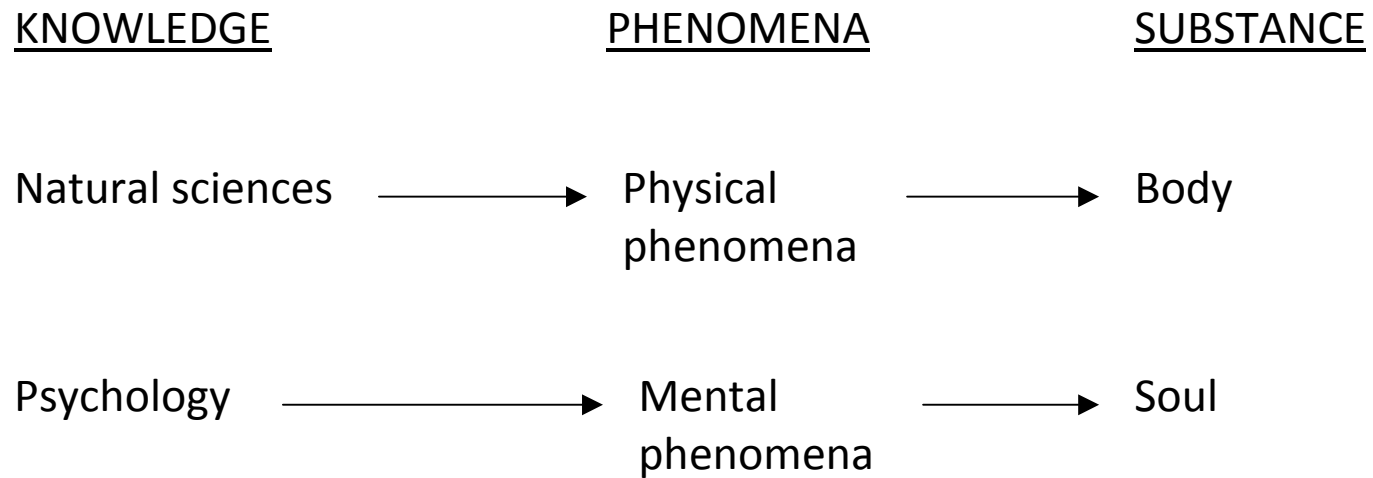
## Realist Epistemology

From whence I think it is easy to draw this observation, that the *ideas of primary qualities* of bodies, are resemblances of them, and their patterns do really exist in the bodies themselves; but the ideas, *produced* in us by these *secondary qualities*, have no resemblance of them at all. There is nothing like our ideas, existing in the bodies themselves. They are in the bodies, we denominate from them, only a power to produce those sensations in us: and what is sweet, blue, or warm in idea, is but the certain bulk, figure, and motion of the insensible parts in the bodies themselves, which we call so.

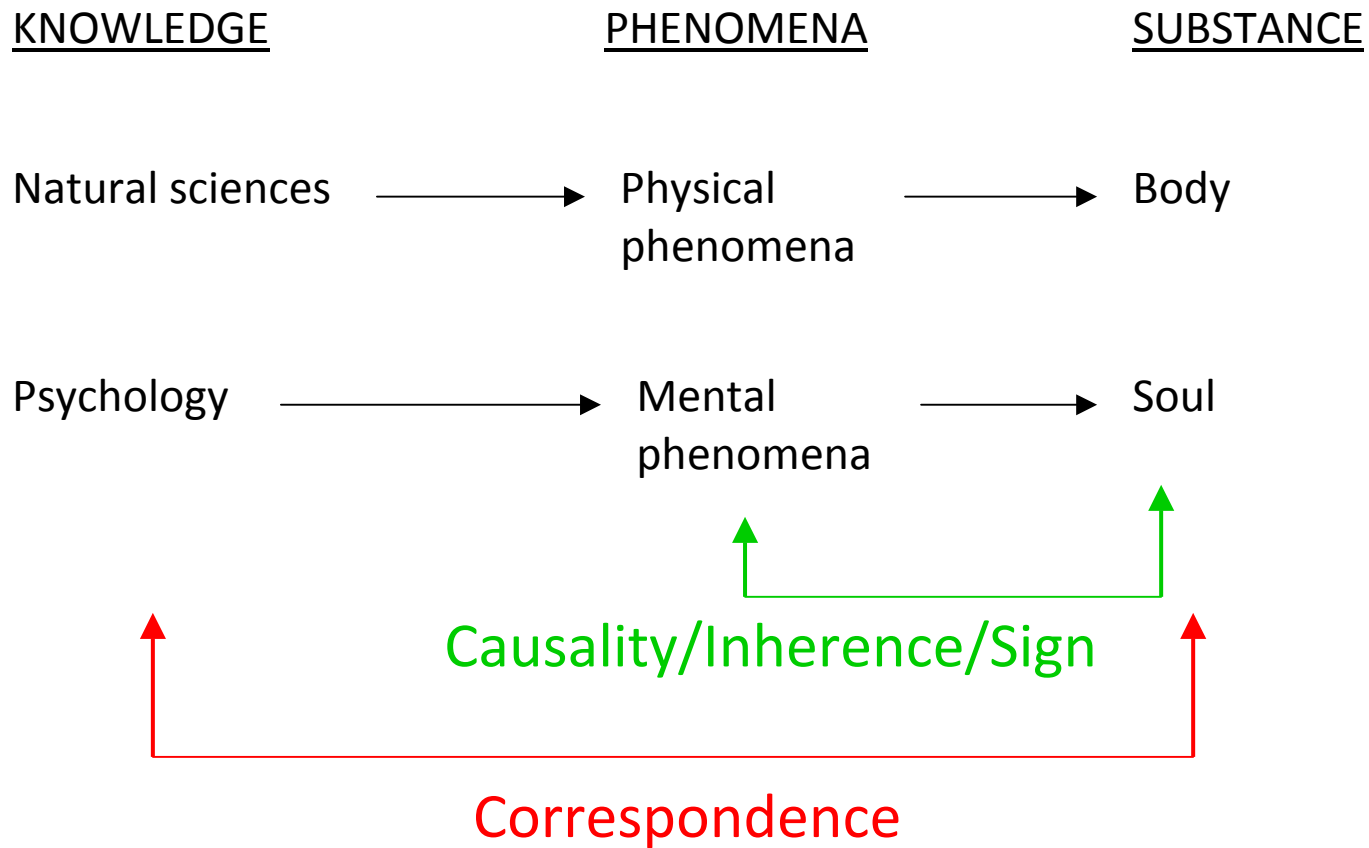
J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II,  
viii, § 15.



# Realist Epistemology



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Body = cause of physical phenomena (PES 15)

Soul = “substantial bearer” (*substanzieller Träger*) of mental phenomena (PES 8 and 15)

Physical phenomena = objects of outer experience

Mental phenomena = objects of inner experience

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But what entitles (*berechtigt*) us to assume that there are such substances? It has been said that such substances are not objects of experience; neither sensation nor inner perception reveal substances to us. Just as in sense perception we encounter phenomena such as warmth, color and sound, in inner perception we encounter manifestations of thinking, feeling and willing. But we never encounter that something of which these things are properties. It is a fiction to which no reality of any sort corresponds (*eine Fiktion, der keinerlei Wirklichkeit entspricht*), or whose existence could not possibly be proved, even if it did exist.

F. Brentano, *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt*, p. 15-16.

## Brentano

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F. Brentano, *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt*, p. 14-16.

## “Idealists”

We have no evidence of anything which, not being itself a sensation, is a **substratum or hidden cause of sensations**. The idea of such a substratum is a purely, mental **creation, to which we have no reason to think that there is any corresponding reality exterior to our minds**.

J.S. Mill, *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, W. Spencer, 1865, vol. 1, p. 17.

Those who hold this opinion are said to doubt or deny the existence of matter. They are sometimes called by the name Idealists, sometimes by that of Sceptics, according to the other opinions which they hold. They include the followers of Berkeley and those of Hume. (...) These philosophers maintain the Relativity of our knowledge in the most extreme form in which the doctrine can be understood, since they contend, not merely that all we can possibly know of anything is the manner in which it affects the human faculties, but that there is nothing else to be known; that affections of human or of some other minds are all that we can know to exist.

J.S. Mill, *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, W. Spencer, 1865,  
vol. 1, p. 17-18.

## W. Hamilton: Relativity of knowledge

(...) all human knowledge, consequently (...) all human philosophy, is only of the relative or phenomenal. In this proposition, the term relative is opposed to the term absolute; and, therefore, in saying that we know only the relative, I virtually assert that we know nothing absolute, nothing existing absolutely; that is, in and for itself, and without relation to us and our faculties. (W. Hamilton, *Lectures on Metaphysics and Logic*, vol. I, Gould & Lincoln, 1859, p. 96-97.)

Therefore:

Material and mental substances are unknowable



All phenomena are to be called inner because they all belong to one reality (*Realität*), be it as constituents or as correlates.

F. Brentano, *Deskriptive Psychologie*, p. 129.

It might first seem as if the concept of mental phenomena would have to be broadened rather than narrowed (*erweitern eher als verengern*), both because the physical phenomena of imagination fall within its scope at least as much as mental phenomena as previously defined, and because the phenomena which occur in sensation cannot be disregarded in the theory of sensation. It is obvious, however, that they are taken into account only as the content of mental phenomena when we describe the specific characteristics of the latter.

F. Brentano, *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt*, p. 140.

## H. Lotze

Matter = “for our knowledge a fully impenetrable thought” (*für unsere Erkenntniss ein völlig undurchdringlicher Gedanke*)  
(*Medizinische Psychologie*, 1852, p. 58)



## W. Hamilton

Matter = "unknown and inconceivable" (*Lectures on Metaphysics and Logic*, vol. I, Gould & Lincoln, 1859, p. 97)

# Brentano

The words “phenomenon” or “appearance” (*Erscheinung*) are often used in opposition to “things which really and truly exist. (...) What has been said about the objects of external perception does not, however, apply in the same way to objects of inner perception. In their case, no one has ever shown that someone who considers these phenomena to be true would thereby become involved in contradictions. (F. Brentano, *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt*, p. 13-14.)

To be a phenomenon, something must exist in itself (*in sich sein*). It is wrong to set phenomena in opposition to what exists in itself (*an sich*). (F. Brentano, *Deskriptive Psychologie*, p. 129.)



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## Mach

A common and popular way of thinking and speaking is to contrast “appearance” with “reality”. (...). To speak of “appearance” may have a practical meaning, but cannot have a scientific meaning. (...) Where there is no contrast, **the distinction between dream and waking, between appearance and reality, is quite otiose and worthless.** (E. Mach, *Die Analyse der Empfindungen*, Fischer, 1922, p. 8-9.)

	Aristotle, <i>De Anima</i> (cf. <i>Psych.</i> , p. 21-22)	Hamilton, Fechner	Contemporary naturalism?	Lotze	Brentano
Physical knowledge	= absolute = substantial	= relative = phenomenal	= absolute = substantial	= relative = phenomenal	= relative = phenomenal
Psychological knowledge	= absolute = substantial	= relative = phenomenal	= relative = phenomenal	= absolute = substantial ( <i>Psych.</i> , p. 26)	= absolute = phenomenal

C[A(this gray table)]

Physical phenomenon = primary object

C[A(this gray table)]

Mental phenomenon = secondary object

C[A(this gray table)]

In modo recto

C[A(this gray table)]

In modo obliquo

C[A(this gray table)]

“The Centaur is a poetic fiction”



“The Centaur is a poetic fiction”

<=>

“There exist mental acts such that they are of a fictional nature, are experienced by poets, and have the property of being about the Centaur”

What are the contents of an act of memory? An act of memory is merely a present state of mind, which we are conscious of, not as absolute, but as relative to, and representing, another state of mind (...). All that is immediately known in the act of memory, is the present mental modification ; that is, the representation and concomitant belief. Beyond this mental modification, we know nothing; and this mental modification is not only known to consciousness, but only exists in and by consciousness. Of any past object, real or ideal, the mind knows and can know nothing, for ex hypothesi no such object now exists; or if it be said to know such an object, it can only be said to know it mediately, as represented in the present mental modification. Properly speaking, however, we know only the actual and present, and all real knowledge is an immediate knowledge.

W. Hamilton, *Lectures on Metaphysics and Logic*, vol. I, Gould & Lincoln, 1859, p. 152.