A Brentanist Framework for Symbolic Intentionality & Symbolic Technologies

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In my presentation I will outline my research programme for the coming years, which is centred on the notion of symbolic intentionality and its application in symbolic technologies. I will begin by briefly explaining this notion, which finds its origin in the School of Brentano, and then outline how it can be used to build a framework that is broadly applicable to systems for symbol manipulation both mental and mechanical.

The idea of symbolic intentionality was introduced precisely at the time when logic and mathematics were becoming mechanised and we were able to delegate our mental labor to cognitive tools such as calculators and computers. However, the Brentanist framework is not limited to these contemporaneous developments, but also covers current developments in Artificial Intelligence. Indeed many of the issues raised in the School of Brentano are still or again being raised now: how is it at all possible to delegate mental processes to machines? Can we trust the results of mechanical symbol manipulation epistemically and ethically?

Yet the question remains why we would use a 19th century theory to approach and answer such questions. As I will show, how the mind and how machines use signs and symbols are issues that originate in 19th century paradigms in psychology and mathematics. The School of Brentano is the nexus where these issues come together and can be appropriately tackled, because Brentano and his students combined their scientific psychology with a philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of language, and a logic both in the sense of a formal system for reasoning as well as a general theory of science. This makes them uniquely suited to develop both an account of symbolic intentionality as well as an account of symbolic technologies.

The programme builds on two breakthroughs in my research: the reconstruction of the Brentanist philosophy of mathematics (Ierna 2011, 2017, 2021, 2022) and the new approach to intentionality (Ierna 2015, 2018, 2023). The innovative element lies in the combination of the concept of symbolic intentionality and the philosophy of mathematics in the School of Brentano and its application to the mechanisation of mathematics and logic in the 19th century. This would lead to a third breakthrough: a Brentanist philosophy of computation. This requires teasing out the relation between symbolic intentionality and symbolic technologies as I will try to outline in my talk.