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5 Was North America Fertile Ground for the Early Phenomenological Movement?

Abstract: Phenomenology arrived in North America during the first decades of the twentieth century. On the continent, it had flourished particularly where the terrain had been prepared by the School of Brentano. Did something similar occur in North America or were the background and context completely different? I will try to show the possible role of some of the competing elements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that favored and opposed phenomenology in North America. Despite significant German influences, North America was not receptive to phenomenology in the beginning. Philosophy and psychology were closely connected, in Germany as well as the US, but the prevailing imported approaches of Wundt and Herbart were not congenial for the reception of Brentano and Husserl. Moreover, Husserl's work was initially taken up in the context of debates about realism in the US, with limited interest in the original contributions of his phenomenological method.

5.1 Introduction

Before phenomenology started to take root in North America in the 1930s and '40s, already some seeds had been sown during the first decades of the twentieth century. On the continent, such seeds had fallen into fertile ground particularly where the terrain had been prepared by the School of Brentano. Did something similar occur in North America or were the background and context significantly different? In this contribution, I will try to show the possible role of some of the competing elements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that might have favored or opposed the early adoption of phenomenology in North America.

The large waves of German migrants as well as the numerous American students in Germany would suggest a receptive context for the German-language works of the early phenomenological movement during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. And yet, phenomenology did not really take root in American soil until much later.¹ The question then is: why was this not fertile ground for phenomenology?

¹ The Chronology for the reception of phenomenology in the Anglo-American context in Spiegelberg (1982) starts with Husserl's London Lectures in 1922. Strassfeld (2022, 47) lists Farber's 1925

On the one hand, while philosophy and psychology were closely connected at the time, in Germany as well as the US, the prevailing imported approach of Wundt was opposed to the phenomenologies of Brentano and Husserl. On the other, Husserl's works were initially interpreted and taken up in the context of "Logical Realism" (Parkhurst), "Logical Objectivism" (Ryle) and as a "defence of a realist theory of universals" (Knight). Given the contingent particularities of the succession of philosophical movements in the US, the early arrival of the phenomenological movement seems mostly to have been untimely.

5.2 Brentano in the Background

In order to contextualize the reception of phenomenology in North America, it is informative to start with how Edmund Husserl himself characterized his own position. In various prospective and retrospective texts Husserl gives grand visions of what phenomenology aims to be, for instance in 1922/23 he claims that: "Phenomenology is the utmost consummation of rationalism, but can just as well be termed the utmost consummation of empiricism" (Husserl 2002, 288). This might seem to be mostly hyperbole at first glance, but considering the development of phenomenology from the 1900/01 *Logical Investigations*, we can see what Husserl might have meant by such grand claims. Not so much that there were no differences, ultimately, between rationalism and empiricism (as some kind of philosophical horseshoe theory), but that phenomenology aims at addressing and (ideally) answering or overcoming the fundamental questions of both (De Palma 2020, 74). This is consistent with the mission statement for phenomenology at its inception in 1900/01: finding and founding the relation between the subjectivity of knowing and the objectivity of knowledge. However, this concern is much older than the *Logical Investigations*, originating in the 1890s and Husserl's early "pre-phenomenological"² philosophy of mathematics. His first works were indeed also con-

dissertation (published 1928) *Phenomenology as a Method and as a Philosophical Discipline*, as "the first systematic treatment of Husserl's thought in the English language" and Winthrop Bell's 1927 course "Husserl and the 'Phenomenological' Movement" as the first course in phenomenology in America.

2 This term only makes sense if we confine "phenomenology" to Husserl's own theories. In a broader sense, as we will be using the term here, it also encompasses the positions of Husserl's teachers Brentano and Stumpf. See e.g. Spiegelberg (1982, 6 and 28f.): "How far is it legitimate to begin the history of the Phenomenological Movement with Franz Brentano? ... the main reason for crediting Brentano with having prepared the ground for phenomenology must be sought in specific elements of his philosophy which have influenced and even permeated the fullfledged phenomenology of Husserl and his successors."

cerned with “how to reconcile the objectivity of mathematics, and of all science in general, with a psychological foundation for logic” (Husserl 1900, 6). By “psychological” here he means Franz Brentano’s descriptive psychology. Brentano considered his psychology to be empirical, but not necessarily experimental; subjective, but not at all introspective; and scientific, interdisciplinary, and non-reductionist. Brentano also already struggled with the same problem: how to reconcile a posteriori empirical natural science and a priori logic and mathematics. He tried to navigate a middle course between “extreme” empiricism, exemplified by Mill, and “extreme” idealism, exemplified by Kant.³ In order to characterize his position, it might be tempting to just go along with the title of his main work: *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*. Brentano would be first and foremost an empiricist: “experience alone will be my teacher,” “the foundations of psychology as well as of the natural sciences are perception and experience” (Brentano 1874, 35).⁴ However, this does not do justice to his extensive discussions of the nature of philosophy and science as well as their shared methodologies: “Philosophy is a science like other sciences and therefore it must also have a method that is in essence identical to the method of the other sciences” (Brentano 1895). While Brentano did not begin his academic career as a mathematician as Husserl did, he nevertheless saw a fundamental role for mathematics:

Mathematics reveals in a clear and understandable way the fundamental nature of all true scientific investigation. There is no better field of study for gaining one’s first clear view of laws, deduction, hypothesis, and many other important logical concepts. (Brentano 1874, 34; 1995, 21)

For Brentano mathematics is both logically as well as chronologically prior to the sciences: it has come to maturity first and can serve as the model. Brentano is very clear about the status of mathematics itself: “Mathematics is not an inductive, but a purely deductive, and in this sense, a priori science” (Brentano 1870–1917, *Megethologie* 40025 f.). For Brentano mathematics is deductive, a priori, and analytic. Yet, this does not produce a tension with approaches in the empirical sciences, but supports them: “Indeed, were it not, then there would be no science at all, neither deductive nor inductive” (Brentano 1870–1917, *Megethologie* 40025 f.). In order to yield scientific knowledge and laws, inductive a posteriori experience needs a foundation that is not itself based again on experience.

³ For Brentano’s strategic positioning between German Idealism and British Empiricism, see Ierna (2022).

⁴ Translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

It is clear that the whole attempt to justify induction by induction itself, leads to a vicious circle. It must clearly be proven a priori, hence in a purely deductive way. And this deductive way is through the calculus of probability. (Brentano 1870–1917, *Megethologie*, 40024f.)

Mathematics gives us tools like the calculus of probability and statistics, which we can apply to experience to justify inductive knowledge, but mathematics itself is founded analytically a priori. This is the way that Brentano sought to conciliate a priori and a posteriori knowledge, deductive and inductive methods. According to Brentano's approach, from the common starting point of our sensations, we can proceed inductively in both directions, outward and inward, in finding the laws of coexistence and succession of all phenomena. Laboratory experiments as well as research on children, animals, or so-called "primitive" populations could also all contribute to the science of psychology (Ierna 2014). Yet, this descriptive psychology or psychognosy or phenomenology (as Brentano variously called it) had the advantage of the epistemic privilege of inner perception. Alongside mathematics, the absolute certainty of inner perception constituted the second column of Brentano's scientific architecture.

This brief outline of the similarities of Husserl and Brentano at a methodological level (how to reconcile the various dichotomies of subjectivity and objectivity, induction and deduction, a priori and a posteriori, analytic and synthetic, in epistemology and philosophy of science) are meant to illustrate how a previous reception of Brentano and his other students facilitated the uptake of Husserl's as well.

One of the reasons for the fertile ground in Munich and for the origination of the phenomenological movement precisely there, was that here there was a generally congenial atmosphere. Throughout the years the people in Munich, more than at any other German university, had engaged very positively with Brentano and his School; i.e. with that circle of thinkers to which Husserl himself also belonged.⁵ (Schuhmann 1988, 97)

This talk of "fertile ground" and "a generally congenial atmosphere" then forms the background for the core issue of the present contribution: Was North America (and more specifically: the USA), fertile ground for the early phenomenological movement? Was there a comparable previous reception of Brentano and other Brentanists? Was there a "congenial atmosphere," a sympathetic audience, which had "engaged very positively" with other thinkers from the same broad phenomenological movement? Or, rather, was the soil more suitable to other transplanted people

⁵ Similar arguments can be given for Husserl's reception in Great Britain, see e.g. Spiegelberg (1982, 662): "Before World War I the interest in Husserl's phenomenology was overshadowed by that in Franz Brentano, promoted chiefly by the analytical psychology of G. F. Stout, and in Alexius Meinong, stirred by Bertrand Russell's three articles in *Mind* (1906)."

and ideas? Was there competition for the nutrients in the intellectual soil? Did the new environment change or selectively enhance the invasive exotic species, rendering them more congenial to their new home?

5.3 Land of Opportunity?

There are multiple reasons why one would at first expect a fertile soil in the “land of opportunity.” During the nineteenth century there had been an ongoing import and transformation of German ideas, values, products, not to mention the mass migration from Germany into the United States. In the period going from 1820 to 1900 approximately 5 million German immigrants arrived in the United States, on a total of approximately 20 million immigrants (Faust 1909 I, 585). This should already make it plausible that among the various foreign influences, the German one was likely the largest. Moreover, it also makes sense to compare this to the overall population in the US.⁶ Starting with a mere 5 million total population in 1800 it grew to 76 million in 1900. Given the large influx of Germans and their descendants this also implies that:

By the end of the nineteenth century immigrants from German-speaking Europe constituted one of the largest ethnic groups, German was a popular foreign language to study, partly as the major language of modern science, and nearly a thousand newspapers in German were being published in America in the 1890s. (McClelland 2020, 207)

Besides a sharp rise in migration in the 1840s and 1850s in connection with events on the old continent, including the Irish potato famine and the various attempts at revolutions in 1848, German immigration peaked at the end of the nineteenth century, in the 1880s, when nearly a million and a half came to settle in the US. According to the US census bureau, in the 1890s nearly 15 percent of the population in the US was foreign-born and more than 40 million Americans self-reported to be of German ancestry in 2020. While the sinking of the British passenger ship *Lusitania* with 123 US citizens aboard by a German submarine in 1915 and WWI put a temporary crimp on German-American relations and immigration, migration

⁶ Regrettably, as far as I have been able to determine, most of these statistics merely concern the citizens and registered immigrants, not the native populations of North America (at least before 1860) nor those held in slavery. This means that all such “overall” numbers have a large margin of uncertainty and are *au fond* if not racist then at least Eurocentric.

from Germany to the US surged again immediately after WWI, during the 1930s, and in the aftermath of WWII, but without reaching the heights of the 1880s.⁷

The opposite movement is likewise relevant here. During the nineteenth century approximately 10,000 American students went to Germany to pursue their studies, often with a view to obtain a (prestigious) German diploma. This number peaked in the academic year 1895–96, when more than 500 Americans were officially enrolled at a German university (Veysey 1965, 130). Studying in Germany was so common that in 1925 Herbert Gardiner in his retrospective “The First Twenty-Five Years of the American Philosophical Association” could quite straightforwardly state: “For the Association in the next quarter of a century we may repeat the slogan familiar to many of us from our student days in Germany, *Vivat, crescat, floreat!*” (Gardiner 1926, 158) Even if one hadn’t gone to Germany, they would have been familiar with German academic culture through the many students and colleagues who had gone.

During the nineteenth century many American institutes of higher learning were founded and/or underwent massive growth. Johns Hopkins (1876) was explicitly modeled on the German research-university originally envisioned by Humboldt.⁸ Andrew D. White, founder and first president of Cornell, had studied in Berlin and brought this experience to bear on the design of Cornell University. Stanford was on its turn modeled on Cornell.⁹ Tappan, president of the University of Michigan, likewise believed in the superiority of the German approach:

On the other hand, in Protestant Germany, what an advance has been made! In no part of the world has University education been so enlarged, and made so liberal and thorough. The Universities of Protestant Germany stand forth as model institutions. (Tappan 1851, 39)

Harvard had of course been founded long before all that, in 1636, but the philosophy department had grown significantly in the second half of the nineteenth cen-

7 It would still take two years before the US entered the war, but the sinking of the *Lusitania* sparked a wave of anti-German sentiment which ultimately contributed not only to an overall change in political attitude in the US, but also a shift in the loyalties of German-Americans. See e.g. Trommler (2009). Münsterberg, who was ardently pro-German, was severely ostracized after the outbreak of the war and particularly after the sinking of the *Lusitania*. For this and other repercussions on philosophy, see Kuklick (1977, § 23).

8 “The spirit of research characteristic of the German university was now securely planted upon American soil, and so quickly bore fruit that Germany very soon recognized Johns Hopkins as a sister institution. Almost all the earlier members of the faculty were doctors of German universities” (Faust 1909 II, 229).

9 For a more extensive discussion of the influence of the German “Humboldt university” model on American higher education, see Muller (1976).

tury (Pochmann 1957, 666; Münsterberg 1901, 475) and begun to teach German philosophy:

The crucial innovation in the eighteen-seventies was the introduction of regular instruction in the domain of German philosophy. This occurred at Harvard in 1873–1874, when Professor Bowen for the first time conducted his course in modern German philosophy. Harvard's lead was followed in a few years by others of the larger schools.¹⁰ (Pochmann 1957, 310)

Up to now everything looks perfectly poised for an overall positive reception and rapid uptake of the German-language philosophies of Brentano and his students. Brentano's *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkte* was published in 1874, and it would seem at first blush that it would have been perfectly timed and suitable to be included in the curriculum. Yet, once we start looking at the actual content of the courses and the books used by Bowen and others, it becomes obvious why Brentano and his ilk might instead not have been such a good fit after all.¹¹

The books Bowen used in Harvard for his courses in German philosophy were of an entirely different orientation from Brentano's: Schwegler's *Geschichte der Philosophie im Umriss*, Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Hartmann's *Philosophie des Unbewussten*, Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (Pochmann 1957, 674). Given Brentano's vocal criticism of German Idealism and Kant as its (perhaps unwitting) initiator, a context in which Hegelians, Kantians, and their direct interlocutors were given center stage, would not have facilitated the uptake of his type of "Austrian" philosophy.¹² Bowen was certainly not an exception, if we look at the other courses offered by prominent philosophers at Harvard thereafter. Royce lectured on "German Ethics" in 1883/84, on the "Movement of German Thought 1770–1830" (the dates suggest a thoroughgoing engagement with the rise and fall of German Idealism), and a seminary in metaphysics on Hegel in the years 1890–93. James likewise held courses on Kantian philosophy in the years 1896–1899 (Pochmann 1957, 673).

This is partially preceded by and overlaps with the spread of German Idealism outside of academia. Indeed, the first reception of Kant and Hegel happened through

10 "Further evidence of the widespread adoption by the 1880s of the method and content of German philosophical study appears in the use of a large number and variety of German textbooks, some in the original and others in translation" (Pochmann 1957, 319).

11 "In American philosophy at the end of the nineteenth century there was small interest in Empiricism and almost no interest in Realism. ... In contrast to these fragmentary realistic tendencies, Idealism, both epistemological and ontological, was everywhere rampant" (Montague 1937, 140).

12 For this label and its opposition to "German" philosophy, see Smith (1994, 1) and Ierna (2020, 99f.).

the “St. Louis Hegelians” Denton Snider and William Torrey Harris who founded the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* which ran from 1867 to 1887.

Kant and Hegel provided most of the inspiration for the American idealists. Before the Civil War idealism had gained more advocates outside the academic community than within it, and the specifically Hegelian idealism that developed in the United States after 1865 was first promoted by a group of non-academic thinkers, especially in the St. Louis area. (Veysey 1965, 193)

Nearly three quarters of the journal’s contents were dedicated to German philosophy, and of that again more than half to Kant and Hegel. It is hard to overestimate how popular Hegel was at the time. It is likely that beside the St. Louis journal also the influence of the popular history of philosophy manual by Schwegler contributed to this. Schwegler’s *Geschichte der Philosophie im Umriss* had appeared in German in 1848 and was translated into English twice. In Great Britain it was published as *Handbook of the History of Philosophy* in 1867 by James Hutchinson Stirling. Stirling added a “Note Conclusory” (Stirling 1867, 396) to Schwegler’s own text titled “Why the History of Philosophy ends with Hegel and not with Comte,” which also conveys the idea that German philosophy was in all respects superior to any other philosophy:

are we then in advance of Germany? Is Germany in any respect behind us? Is not the truth rather this, that at this moment Germany leads the whole world even in empirical science ? ... Can any empirical science be named, indeed, for which Germany writes not the text-books? ... And to what is this superiority owing? Why, to nothing else than the superior faculties, the superior ideas, and the superior terms, which have resulted from the hard discipline of German philosophy. (Stirling 1867, 414)

This estimation of German philosophy by the Scotsman Stirling is *grosso modo* also confirmed in practice by the list of authors of the most used handbooks and texts in America at the end of the nineteenth century: Zeller, Heeren, Elmendorf, Falckenberg, Fischer, Ueberweg, Windelband, Erdmann, Harm, Schlegel, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kant, Külpe, Schwegler, Deussen, Lübke, Hartmann, Volkmann, Beneke, Höffding, Ribot, Lotze, and Wundt (Pochmann 1957, 674).

Please note the last name in that list: Wundt. Like Brentano, Wundt had published a monograph on psychology in 1874.¹³ Contrary to Brentano, however,

¹³ There were certainly important similarities between the projects of Brentano and Wundt (and others at the time), such as the idea of a scientific psychology “without the soul” (see i.a. Textor 2021, ch. 2, §§ 3–7).

Wundt was enthusiastically received in the US at the end of the nineteenth century, no doubt due to the intercession of his numerous American students.

In the 1890s, Wundt's earlier US visitors and disciples were now in place at key institutions, from where their own disciples would soon embark for Leipzig. ... US students clustered in Wundt's laboratory and lecture rooms in the early 1890s. Between 1890 and 1893, five prospective American psychologists obtained PhD degrees under Wundt's supervision. The example of the little group suggests how closely knit the early network of US psychologists was, and to what extent American Wundt students assisted one another in furthering their careers. (Werner 2013, 159f.)

Many of their names are indeed quite well-known: "Frank Angell (PhD Leipzig 1891), Edward Pace (1891), Edward Scripture (1891), Edward Titchener (1892, British), and Lightner Witmer (1893) knew one another at Leipzig" (Werner 2013, 160).

Among those who had previously studied at Wundt's lab in the 1880s we might also note James Cattell, Harry Gardiner, James Baldwin, George Mead, Hugo Münsterberg, and Stanley Hall, who was at Wundt's lab when it opened in 1879 and later became the first president of the psychological APA. James Creighton, who had also studied in Leipzig and Berlin in 1889/90 (Auxier 2005, 549) seems to have played an important role too: "His translation of the writings of Wundt materially aided in the introduction of German philosophy into America" (Pochmann 1957, 316). The "material aid" consists in having produced the first translation of Wundt's (1894) *Lectures on Human and Animal Psychology* together with Titchener, which went through numerous editions: 1894, 1896, 1901, 1907, 1912, etc., a further testament to the rapid spread and adoption of Wundt's paradigm in America. Creighton contributed to this in his various roles. For instance, Creighton contributed to the development of the Sage School of Philosophy at Cornell, which became the model for graduate education in philosophy across the US (Katzav and Vaesen 2022, 337; Auxier 2005, 550). Moreover, as one of the founders in 1901, in 1902 he became the president of the philosophical APA. The overlap between philosophy and psychology was also present at the institutional level: "The American Philosophical Association, founded in 1901, is, historically, an offshoot from the American Psychological Association founded ten years earlier" (Gardiner 1926, 145).

Hence, again, we see how in theory such an environment could have been fertile ground for a reception of Brentano and his school, but in practice, once we look at the details, was not. Brentano's absence is indirectly confirmed also by the fact that it took until 1921 for Titchener to discuss the rivalry between

Wundt and Brentano in any detail, which apparently had not been a concern in America until then:¹⁴

The year 1874 saw the publication of two books which, as the event has shown, were of first-rate importance for the development of modern psychology. ... one would look in vain for any sign of closer intellectual kinship between them; hardly, indeed, could one find a greater divergence either of tendency or of training. ... The student of psychology, though his personal indebtedness be also twofold, must still make his choice for the one or the other. There is no middle way between Brentano and Wundt. (Titchener 1921a, 108)

Brentano's approach had not been a serious rival in the US, while on the continent there had been several controversies between the School of Brentano and the followers of Wundt.¹⁵

The juxtaposition between Brentano's empirical (phenomenological) psychology and Wundt's physiological (experimental) psychology became the discriminating element between the 'German' and 'Austrian pathway' to scientific psychology. (Antonelli 2018, 13)

I think we can safely say that "Austrian psychology" didn't really have a significant impact on American debates at the time. Those who seriously engaged with Brentano all come from a later generation of students. A brief search of the *Dictionary of Modern American Philosophers* shows that all of those who engaged with Brentano on American soil, natives as well as migrants, critics as well as proponents, were born after the turn of the century: Hall (1901–60), Gurwitsch (1901–73), Findlay (1903–87), Spiegelberg (1904–90), Bergmann, G. (1906–87), and Chisholm (1916–99). All, except Alain LeRoy Locke (1885–1954), whose 1918 dissertation con-

¹⁴ In Titchener's (1912) article on "The Schema of Introspection," Brentano is mentioned only once, to distinguish his phenomenology from that of Husserl: "The phenomenology that I have in mind is, of course, that of Husserl, and not that of Brentano and Stumpf. An adequate discussion would require another article; I can here only express my opinion that no form of phenomenology—phenomenology of mind, *Gegenstandstheorie*, science of selves—can be truly scientific, for the reason that the implied attitude to experience is multiply motived and fluctuating, while the *minimum* requirement of science is a fixed and constant point of view." Please also note that he, like others, classes phenomenology together with *Gegenstandstheorie*, even though Meinong is nowhere mentioned in the article.

In Titchener's "Functional Psychology and the Psychology of Act: I" he explicitly distinguishes the American and German approaches: "Functional psychology, in this sense, is especially American, and the psychology of act especially German" (Titchener 1921b, 519). Clearly act-psychology in Brentano's style had not become a serious competitor on the other side of the Atlantic.

¹⁵ See Ierna (2009, 498f.). Before studying with Brentano in Vienna and Stumpf in Halle, it might bear mention here that Husserl, very briefly, attended lectures in philosophy by Wundt while studying astronomy in Leipzig (Schuhmann 1977, 4).

cerned the theory of value, and Helen Huss Parkhurst (1887–1959), whose 1917 dissertation on “Recent Logical Realism” we will discuss in more detail later on.

We already noted how Brentano’s 1874 *Psychology* appeared seemingly at the right moment, when German philosophy was being introduced in the curriculum, and yet ultimately lost out due to the preference for Kant and German Idealism on the one side and Wundt on the other. What about Husserl? Did his works appear at a favorable moment to be translated and transmitted across the Atlantic?

While there might have been an important moment of impact and growth of German philosophy right after the publication of Brentano’s main work in 1874, the period following Husserl’s *Logical Investigations* in 1900/01, was much more self-consciously aware of this fact. Consider, for instance, the address held by William James at the opening ceremony of Harvard’s Germanic Museum on November 10, 1903: “Our university, like most American universities, is Teutomaniac. Its ideas of scholarship and of the scholarly character have been inspired by German rather than by French or English models” (James 1904, 32; Tatlock and Erlin 2005, 11). Or the general sentiment at the 1904 St. Louis World Fair, which also encompassed the International Congress of Arts and Sciences organized by Münsterberg: “a pivotal moment of American-German academic exchange” (McClelland 2020, 202). Indeed, many if not most of the international speakers were from Germany or had been educated in Germany (Münsterberg 1904, 6–7).

American academia by this point had certainly matured into a partner of comparable stature to its European inspirations. Rather than passively absorbing theories and methods imported from elsewhere, by this point there was a much more autonomous discourse in philosophy in the US. Thanks in no small part to the founding of institutes, organizations, and journals, such as the Sage school, the APA, and the *Philosophical Review* (all linked to Creighton), America had developed its own schools and movements, not just by picking and choosing fashions from the old continent, but grown on its own soil. Anything coming from across the pond would be selected and interpreted in light of ongoing local debates and discussions. Given that both Brentano as well as early Husserl (as well as the nascent current of analytical philosophy) were connected to a criticism of idealism (broadly understood) from a realist standpoint (broadly understood), we should take into consideration how the ongoing debates in America about realism¹⁶ affected the re-

16 These are also mentioned by Gardiner as part of the important developments of American philosophy and discussions at the meetings of the APA: “we have reflected in our meetings the best thinking of American philosophers in our time. The future historian, inspecting our records, would be able to derive from them a not inaccurate conspectus of the state of philosophy in America in the first quarter of the century. ... He would discover among those who had contributed to our discussions the names of those who have been leaders in some of the most significant philo-

ception of the early phenomenological movement. In which respects was it understood differently than on the continent, given the differing background and debates?

5.4 Phenomenology: Real and Realist

Starting at the turn of the century various works appeared with “realism” in the title (e.g. in Montague’s (1902) “Royce’s Refutation of Realism” and Perry’s (1902) “Royce’s Refutation of Realism and Pluralism”), which then bloomed into a movement self-identifying as “New Realism”: the 1910 “Program and First Platform of Six Realists”¹⁷ and the 1912 *New Realism: Co-operative Studies in Philosophy*. These were soon followed by Roy Wood Sellars’ (1916) *Critical Realism* and the 1920 collective volume *Essays in Critical Realism*.¹⁸ In various contexts, the development of New Realism was linked by commentators to earlier developments on the other side of the pond.¹⁹

sophical movements of our time; I refer, of course, to such movements as those of Pragmatism, of the ‘New’ and ‘Critical’ Realism, and the Theory of Value” (Gardiner 1926, 157).

17 “The group consisted of Perry and Holt from Harvard, Marvin and Spaulding from Princeton, Pitkin and myself from Columbia” (Montague 1937, 142). A connection between Husserl and the six realists was already noted by Gurwitsch in 1940, see Strassfeld (2022, 36), also see Willard (1995, 165 n. 26). The most extensive and integrated treatment of the realism(s) of Brentano, Meinong, early Husserl, Russell, Moore, and the Six Realists can be found in the introduction to Chisholm’s (1960) *Realism and the Background of Phenomenology*.

18 With contributions by Durant Drake, Arthur Lovejoy, James Pratt, Arthur Rogers, George Santayana, Roy Wood Sellars, and C. A. Strong.

19 Also see Textor (2021, ch. 9) for an interesting comparison of four types of positions with respect to the status of the elements of the tripartition “act content object,” as originally described by Russell in 1919. According to Textor (2021, 215–217): 1) Brentanists would accept the tripartition, 2) Cambridge Realists (including Russell pre-1918) would “reject the distinction between content and object, but argue that the distinction between act and object can be discovered in introspection,” 3) Neutral Monists such as Mach and the American Realists (including Russell post-1918) “reject the distinction between act and object as a fundamental distinction given in consciousness,” and finally 4) British Idealists “agree with Neutral Monists that experience is non-relational”, but do take it to be fundamentally mental. In Russell’s words: “American realists ... have rejected both the act and the content, and have kept only the object; while idealists, in effect if not in words have rejected the object and kept the content” (Russell 1919, 25). Russell himself declares that an analysis into act and object is no longer satisfactory: “I am at a loss to discover any actual phenomenon which could be called an ‘act’ and could be regarded as a constituent of a presentation.” The inspiration for this change was “reinforced by the arguments of James and the American Realists” (Russell 1919, 25f.).

there has arisen almost yesterday another variety of speculation—perhaps the fifty-seventh—known as the New Realism. Influenced largely by Franz Brentano, Meinong and Edmund Husserl in Germany; by Bertrand Russell in England.²⁰ (Siegfried 1926, 310)

Indeed, there certainly had already been a “revolt against idealism” on the continent in the second half of the nineteenth century, followed soon by the British revolt against idealism by Russell and Moore, who were inspired at least in part by Brentano and his students.²¹ The contention that the American developments might be a continuation of this broad trend is hence not very surprising, but needs to be examined in more detail.²² Can we find general characterizations of their positions that would match central aspects of early phenomenology as well as explicit links between the schools and movements on both sides of the Atlantic?²³

Frank Thilly (first president of the Western APA) seems to provide both elements:

The contemporary philosophies of the United States are largely characterized by their opposition to traditional idealism. ... The new realists accord full ontological status to things of thought (subsistences) as well as to physical entities (existences); things are real which do not exist, for to exist means to be in space and time. (Thilly 1926, 522, 526)

The opposition to German Idealism and an alignment with the natural sciences are key ingredients in distinguishing Austrian philosophy from German philosophy (Haller 1991, 50; Ierna 2020, 99 f.). The second passage in the quotation quite directly references the controversy between Brentano and Meinong, which was also central to several of Russell’s works at the beginning of the twentieth century. This analysis is echoed by Roy Wood Sellars:

²⁰ Husserl is not quoted in the book *New Realism*, Meinong only indirectly through Russell, and Brentano only by Holt for his analysis of color in his 1907 *Untersuchungen zur Sinnespsychologie*, and not the *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*.

²¹ Sellars (1927, 507): “Mr. G. E. Moore fired what is usually considered the opening gun of the attack upon idealism in his essay entitled, ‘The Refutation of Idealism’. This was published in *Mind* in 1903”; Also see Bell (1999) for the (Brentanian) background and context of this “coup” against idealism.

²² On Russell’s relationship to the new realists and the critical realists, also see Neuber (2024a). On Perry and the New Realists as precursors of analytic philosophy, see Neuber (2024b).

²³ “More than any other twentieth-century philosophers, Meinong and Brentano share the concerns both of British and American ‘realism’ and of what Husserl calls ‘phenomenology’. In this respect, they are less provincial than are subsequent philosophers in either tradition” (Chisholm 1960, 12).

This realistic movement is likely to seem tremendously important to the thinker who has participated in it. He sees it as a right-about-face in Anglo-American philosophy. Not only was it a protest against the perspective and assumptions of traditional idealism; it was also an effort to build afresh upon the foundations of the sciences. (Sellars 1927, 503)

The “about face” Sellars mentions is evident in the shift away from German Idealism and towards the newer logic as well as laboratory-backed psychology and philosophy of mind in the style of Wundt. Nevertheless, Sellars also sees a difference between American and English realism:

Thus we shall see that the English realists have had a somewhat different notion of mind and mental acts than have Americans. To what does this go back? Perhaps to the influence of G. E. Moore and Russell, and perhaps from them to the work of Meinong and Brentano? (Sellars 1927, 504f.)

The distinction upon which Mr. Moore puts so much stress is characteristic of this English type of realism. It is that between the mental act of awareness and the object of that act. ... Whether this distinction between act and object was suggested by Brentano and Meinong or was worked out by himself I do not know. (Sellars 1927, 507f.)

Sellars underscores here the kind of logical realism that accords a certain ontological dignity to the contents of a judgment, which is enabled by Brentano’s notion of intentionality.²⁴ The link between the British realists and the School of Brentano is clearly noticeable. Brentano himself already distinguished between act, content, and object of a mental act in his lectures and then his students took over and refined this distinction, e.g. in Meinong and Höfler’s (1890) *Logik* as well as in Twardowski’s (1894) “Content and Object.”

This was also noticed by Knight, who pointed to Husserl as the more recent and influential author and to Bolzano as a noted predecessor in this respect:

One of the chief characteristics of German philosophy since the beginning of the century has been the development of theories which hold that reality is not co-extensive with existence. Among the most influential of these theories has been that of Edmund Husserl. Husserl, now Professor of Philosophy at Freiburg, has himself been influenced by Franz Brentano, of whom he was a student, and by Bolzano. ... Great stress is laid by Husserl, as indeed by other Ger-

24 Linke (1926) also underscores this. Brentano’s notion of intentionality is the “key” to explain “how consciousness reaches objects.” Both early Husserl and Meinong fruitfully combined the doctrines of Brentano and Bolzano, but Husserl’s further development of (transcendental idealist) phenomenology in the 1913 *Ideas* “proved disappointing” because he moved away from the object side. The main tendency in German logic, according to Linke, is “anti-psychological” and based on a *Gegenstandstheorie*: “The men who deserve the greatest credit for the increasing success of this tendency are B. Bolzano and F. Brentano.”

man realists, on “intentionality,” in virtue of which the mind can know, and have other relations to, objects external to itself. (Knight 1927, 79f.)

We see here that “intentionality” is considered important not so much for the analysis of mental acts or as a demarcation criterion for the mind, but rather for the ontological (and metaphysical) issue of the relation between reality and existence. This, rather than “the notion of mind and mental acts” is what rendered Austrian Philosophy so interesting to a whole generation of British and American philosophers and is perhaps made most clear in the notorious lecture course proposed by Ryle:

I even offered an unwanted course of lectures, entitled ‘Logical Objectivism: Bolzano, Brentano, Husserl and Meinong’... I was right in thinking that their Meaning-theories would reflect some light on and borrow some light from the partly parallel doctrines of Frege and of Moore and Russell in their early Edwardian days. (Ryle 1970, 8)

Ryle is very explicit about the context in which he is reading Husserl, and that he has no interest in Husserl’s transcendental idealist phenomenology:

A good deal of phenomenology does indeed get into the second edition of Husserl’s *Logische Untersuchungen*, which is what I was reading alongside of Meinong, Frege, Bolzano, Moore and Russell.... I realized pretty soon that Husserl’s intentionalist, anti-psychologistic theory of Meaning/Nonsense, which was what interested me, owed nothing to his posterior Phenomenology, and bequeathed too little to it. ... Fairly soon in the 1930s I dropped my rather solitary studies of Husserl’s *Logische Untersuchungen* and of his phenomenology. (Ryle 1970, 9)

Ryle was intimately familiar with phenomenology at the time, having traveled to Freiburg and met Husserl and Heidegger, but his sympathies clearly lay with Husserl’s earliest phenomenology from around 1900. In his 1932 article on “Phenomenology” he proceeds to outline first and foremost Brentano’s descriptive psychology under this header; then Husserl’s early, realist phenomenology, and finally to criticize and disagree with his transcendental idealism:

Phenomenology seems to have turned in Husserl’s hands into an egocentric metaphysic. But this seems to be the result of one or two false theories which need never, and should never, have trespassed into the analysis of types of mental functioning. (Ryle 2009 [1932], 181).

In so far as Husserl is still working in the same tradition as Brentano and Meinong, Ryle endorses his phenomenology, in so far as he is moving into a more substantive (egological) metaphysics, Ryle rejects it. While Ryle certainly had a significant influence in later years (see e.g. Thomasson 2002, § 6), it is difficult to estimate in how far his views on “phenomenology” affected the American context in the 1920s.

Ryle is however quite explicit in his assessment of Husserl's influence in Great Britain:

[Husserl] aroused almost no interest in the English-speaking world at this time [between the *Logical Investigations* and the *Ideas*]. His thunder had been stolen by Meinong and Frege on the Continent, by Moore and Russell at Cambridge, and by Cook Wilson in Oxford. His message was *démodé* before it was heard of. (Ryle 2009 [1946], 227)

In this respect, Ryle would agree that early phenomenology, that is to say pre-transcendental pre-idealistic phenomenology, did not take root in the British Isles at the time, at least not under the banner of “phenomenology” (which Ryle considered an unfortunate and infelicitous label anyway). In Ryle's analysis, it is rather Husserl's theory of meaning in so far as it was continuous and blended in with other contemporary and local theories that allowed him any reception at all.²⁵

The early phenomenological movement and the core notion of intentionality were hence tied up with a very specific debate, mediated by the reception of Russell and Moore, linked to the theories of Bolzano and Frege, and brought in connection with “logical objectivism” and “logical realism.” Certainly this was a very different kind of environment for Brentano and the early Husserl than Munich. If we identify the origin of the Phenomenological Movement (in the stricter Husserlian sense) with the physical movement of his students from Munich to Göttingen in 1905 (Ierna 2020, 104; Parker 2021, 15), can we then not also find American students who took Husserl's theories from the continent to the US and kickstarted the movement across the Atlantic?

Indeed, there are several examples of students from the US, specifically also from Harvard, that went to study with Husserl at the beginning of the twentieth century. A famous example in this respect is Winthrop Bell (Bell 2019, 28f.; Strassfeld 2022, 37f.). After studying in Leipzig for a year (also attending lectures by Wundt), he became interested in phenomenology and went to Göttingen to study with Husserl from 1911 to 1914. However, due to the outbreak of WWI, Bell did not get the chance to travel back across the Atlantic to bring his new insights home. Indeed, he was arrested and imprisoned right at the outbreak of the war. The faculty went to examine him in prison and Bell was able to successfully defend his dissertation “Eine kritische Untersuchung der Erkenntnistheorie Josiah Royces,” but remained interned until the end of the war in 1918. He returned to Canada in 1920, officially received his doctorate only in 1922 and started to teach at Harvard, but left academia in 1927. Hence, Husserl's first North American doctoral

²⁵ Ryle's interest in and appreciation of the early phenomenological theory of meaning is also testified by his apparent closeness to Brentano, as argued by Dewalque (2021).

student, did not really have the opportunity to significantly influence the reception of phenomenology.²⁶ Also other examples that could be given from the 1900s and 1910s were abortive.²⁷ However, there is one other vector of transmission that is relevant and interesting to examine in this connection, which also probably is the first book-length treatment of the School of Brentano in the US.

This link is Helen Huss Parkhurst (Waithe 1995, 346–347; De Waal 2005, 1868–1869). She studied with Theodore and Grace de Laguna at Bryn Mawr, went to Europe in 1913–14 to study in Cambridge and at the Sorbonne. At that point her trajectory differs from Bell's, because when she was caught in the war zone, she did manage to return home and finish her dissertation in the US. She obtained her PhD at Bryn Mawr in 1917, would later become a professor at Columbia, was active in the APA, and collaborated repeatedly with Montague. What is of interest to us here is the content of her dissertation "Recent Logical Realism."

While Parkhurst originally wanted to write on aesthetics, we know from Russell's correspondence that there was little chance for her to work with someone on that topic.

Miss Parkhurst turned up safely, & I have found her a nice person, as you said she was. ... There is nobody here who can help her with aesthetics, & not much to be got in the way of ethics, but she seems to take to the sort of stuff I teach, & I hope it will be useful to her. (Russell to Donnelly, October 19, 1913; Forte 1988, 208)

The "sort of stuff" Russell taught was much more focused on logic, language, and mind, moreover, he thought that the best place to study (for her or perhaps in general) was Austria: "It seems to me folly for her to go to Paris ... On the Continent, I am inclined to think Austria the best country for philosophy at present."²⁸ At the time Meinong was a professor in Graz, and Masaryk and Marty (who died on October 1, 1914) at the German University of Prague. As Sebestik (1994, 215) reports: "Brentano's pupils occupied most of the chairs of philosophy in the Austro-Hungar-

26 "Other early American visitors included Walter B. Pitkin, Winthrop Bell (Canada) and Arthur Chandler, who, however, did not spread the word of phenomenology after their return" (Spiegelberg 1982, 663).

27 Consider Pitkin's failed attempt at translating the *Logical Investigations*, Münsterberg chasing Hocking away from Husserl, etc. and the other examples given in Strassfeld (2019, 4): "Thus, on closer examination the early history of phenomenology reveals itself as a story of lost opportunities on American shores."

28 Russell to Donnelly, April 18, 1913 (Forte 1988, 204). The suggestion to also visit Paris may have come from Donnelly herself, who had also studied at Oxford and the Sorbonne. A further factor might have been Parkhurst's interest in aesthetics and art.

ian Empire. Probably more Brentanians were active in Prague than anywhere else.”

In her dissertation, Parkhurst thanks Russell “for first directing my interest toward the subjects treated in my dissertation” (Parkhurst 1917, 67). These subjects include a critical discussion of “logical realism,” and as Parkhurst points out right at the beginning: “Of realism as of idealism there are many distinct varieties, and logical realism is only one of several outgrowths of the great contemporary realistic movement” (Parkhurst 1917, 5). In the context of this realistic movement, she links together precisely the various strands we also indicated above: “There is, for example, the realism of Külpe, of Russell, of the six Americans, of Mach, and of Frege, as well as that of Meinong and Husserl” (Parkhurst 1917, 5).

In order to bring out as forcefully as possible the fact that Husserl’s reception was not mediated by Brentano in the US as it was in Munich and that “phenomenology” was received in a completely different fashion, I present the following quote, in which the “School of Brentano” is presented not as the students of Brentano, but as the heirs of Bolzano:²⁹

It is only in recent years, with the revival of interest in Bolzano and in the kind of thinking which he initiated, that *Sätze an sich* have been reinstated. At present they go by a variety of names. Marty calls them *Urteilsinhalten*; Meinong, *Objective*; Husserl, *Bedeutungen an sich*; Stumpf, *Sachverhalten*. (Parkhurst 1917, 6)

The dissertation then focuses chiefly on Meinong, with Husserl’s *Logical Investigations* as a secondary source.³⁰ Parkhurst immediately points out that in this context the “fundamental dogma of logical realism” is intentionality, which gives her the one and only occasion to mention Brentano.

This doctrine, though it takes as its point of departure a particular view of the nature of consciousness, throws its main emphasis upon what is neither consciousness nor the product of

²⁹ The link between Husserl and Bolzano can be also found in Ewald (1911, 604): “Pure logistic (Logismus), as its renovator Husserl has pointed out, finds its real origin in Bolzano.” It was later discussed in more detail by Linke (1926), who explicitly links the endeavors by Husserl, Frege, Lotze, and Bolzano.

³⁰ Also see Ewald (1909, 529): “the phenomenological inquiries and theory of objects (*Gegenstandstheorie*) of such pure logicians as Husserl, Stumpf, and Meinong.” Early phenomenology and theory of objects were considered as parallel or even joint enterprises. Likewise Ewald (1914, 617, 626): “Meinong’s *Gegenstandstheorie* has many points of contact with Husserl’s phenomenology, and both authors recognize this relation.” Switching the place of prominence, but keeping the connection, much later Lanz (1924, 521) still could claim: “Thus Meinong’s *Gegenstandstheorie* appears as a mere corollary of the phenomenological principle.”

consciousness. Its concern is to establish the ‘something’ postulated as the invariable correlate of acts of judgment and conception. (Parkhurst 1917, 10)

The focus of the work is then not on the “nature of consciousness,” but on the objects of consciousness which allow the specific Bolzanian type of logical realism. Hence, it is not Brentano’s descriptive psychology that paved the way for Husserl, but merely an instrumental role of his conception of intentionality as well as a mediation of Bolzano’s theories. Indeed, Brentano often lamented that Meinong and Husserl had lost the way by misunderstanding him and misinterpreting Bolzano’s Platonism. It is neither orthodox Brentanism nor Husserl’s post-1913 “transcendental idealist” phenomenology that was of interest to the American philosophers in this period. Hence, in so far as there was a reception at all, it was co-opted by the local debates at the time. In Parkhurst’s dissertation there is no mention of “phenomenology,” but Husserl is recruited as support for Meinong’s *Gegenstandstheorie*. Given Russell’s role of introducing her to the subject, this is not so surprising. As Parkhurst argues, “the core of the whole doctrine” is that the objects about which we judge “do not depend upon the occurrence of the acts by which they are apprehended. They are self-subsistent”:

The god Jupiter who, as Husserl says, is not to be found as a constituent of the intentional experience which refers to him, is neither an ‘immanent’ mental object nor extra-mental. He is *not*. A centaur, adds Husserl, is nothing and nowhere. Yet Jupiter and centaurs, along with the round-square, the square root of -1, and the principle of the parallelogram of forces are subsistent *Gegenstände*. (Parkhurst 1917, 13)

While this argument is to be found in *Ideas I*, it is taken here to be broadly in agreement with the 1900/01 *Logical Investigations*.³¹ Meinong and Husserl are taken both to endorse *Gegenstandstheorie* as a realist, anti-psychologist approach: “Realism thus believes itself to be a doctrine of objects, not only as they appear in discourse, but as they are in themselves, in their non-spatial, non-temporal, non-psychical being” (Parkhurst 1917, 13). Parkhurst allows us hence to draw a quite straight line from Meinong (and Husserl), through Moore and Russell, to the American debates on realism, stating that the origin of modern realism lies not in Moore’s (1903) “The Refutation of Idealism”:

31 “Although Husserl was to accept a version of idealism, the origins of his phenomenology were not unlike those of British and American realism. The first volume of his *Logische Untersuchungen* (1900) is an important defense of a realistic—as opposed to a ‘psychologistic’—interpretation of the truths of logic” (Chisholm 1960, 12).

But in the opinion of this reviewer, our chronology of modern realism might better take its start with the year 1901, the date of the preface to the first edition of Meinong's *Über Annahmen*, which inaugurated the modern phase of Platonic or subsistential realism. (Parkhurst 1930, 46)

The connection of Husserl's early reception in the context of continental "logical realism" and American "new realism" to phenomenology, explicitly by name, is also made by one of the New Realists themselves:

what the New Realists called the domain of 'subsistence', and what Plato called the world of 'Ideas' was the subject-matter of what Husserl called 'phenomenology.' The philosophers just named had recognized the new phase of Being and made their bow to it. But to Husserl belongs the honor of initiating a systematic study of its nature and structure. (Montague 1939, 232)

This explicit connection to "phenomenology," however, should still be read in the context of Husserl's realist period. The "subsistence" and "logical realism" here serve simply as a reformulation of Husserl's anti-psychologism: "That $7+5=12$ is entirely explained by the natures of seven, of five, and of twelve, and not in the least by the nature of consciousness" (Montague 1937, 145).³²

5.5 Concluding Remarks

Can we answer our main question "Was North America Fertile Ground for the early Phenomenological Movement?" now that we have zoomed into this level of detail? We started with general considerations about the philosophical climate in North America. We saw that it was indeed receptive to German philosophy in the period when Brentano's major work, the *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* was published. If we take this work as the beginning of the phenomenological movement, as Spiegelberg also tends to do, calling Brentano the grandfather of phenomenology, then we must conclude that unfortunately it did not have a significant reception at the time. The atmosphere was more favorable to German Idealism and Wundt, both of which were opposed by Brentano and his students. Moving on from the 1870s and 1880s, the climate certainly remained favorable towards German philosophy and led to abundant exchanges of people, works, and theories.

³² This was already noted by Ewald (1906, 252): "Logical laws are independent of the fact of their being apperceived by an individual. ... In contradistinction to psychologistic investigations, which direct their attack against pure logic, Husserl has called his studies (undertaken in the service of pure logic) 'phenomenological'."

Yet, debates in the US had moved on to such topics, that Husserl's early works underwent a very one-sided reception. There was a secondary reception of Brentano's ideas through the works of Meinong, Russell, Moore, and Husserl, which became part of the debate about (logical) realism. Famously, at the "Fifth International Congress of Philosophy" to be held in London in 1915 (which of course never took place), a general session would have been dedicated to "Realism" with "Professors Perry, Meinong, Husserl, Strong, and Alexander."³³ Husserl's position was not fully recognized as "phenomenology" at the time.³⁴ The element that made it interesting to American authors in the early twentieth century was not an analysis of the intentional structure of consciousness or how the world was disclosed in experience, etc. but merely the fact that intentionality seemed to enable a specific realist position about logical entities. Husserl was invited in as a fellow traveler of Meinong (and as a disciple of Bolzano). Husserl's earliest reception before the 1930s and '40s, was generally not a reception of his phenomenology as such, but rather of his "phenomenology" as anti-psychologism and a form of *Gegenstandstheorie*. If by "early phenomenology" we understand (broadly) the theories of Brentano and Husserl up to his switch to idealism, then there barely was any reception of early phenomenology as such in the US and we cannot really speak of "fertile ground." Phenomenology as such took root in the American ecosystem only later, with students like Farber and Cairns who had studied with Husserl during the 1920s.³⁵ While it is certainly true that "Husserl did not go entirely unmentioned in American publications in the first two decades of the twentieth century either" (Strassfeld 2019, 12), it was not his project of phenomenology as a new foundational method that attracted the attention of the American Realists, it was rather his work on mathematics, logic, and the theory of meaning, the particular blend of Brentano and Bolzano he shared with Meinong and (up to a point) Russell: indeed a story of lost opportunities.

³³ See the announcement in *The Monist*, October 1914, 637.

³⁴ Perry (1914, 388) will even go so far as to speak of "the present-day revival of 'phenomenology' by Husserl, Meinong, and Russell," making it clear that the American realists are not using "phenomenology" in the same sense as Husserl himself did, but rather to reference to the broader movement started by Brentano, which influenced all three of the authors in the quote, and specifically in so far as it can contribute to their own concerns with (logical) realism.

³⁵ "Phenomenology could not take real root in the States until the early twenties when Marvin Farber (Freiburg 1923–24) and Dorion Cairns (Freiburg 1924–26 and 1931–32) after their return from Germany wrote American dissertations on Husserl's phenomenology" (Spiegelberg 1982, 663).

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