

# Review of Antonelli (2018)

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doi:10.48106/dial.v74.i1.10

Hamid Taieb. 2020. "Review of Antonelli (2018)."  
*Dialectica* 74(1): 171–176. doi:10.48106/dial.v74.i1.10.



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ANTONELLI, Mauro. 2018. *Vittorio Benussi in the History of Psychology: New Ideas of a Century Ago*, *Studies in the History of Philosophy of Mind* 21, Cham: Springer.

The history of phenomenology has not been a peaceful and autonomous process taking place independently of any competitors. On the contrary, from the very beginning of their inquiries, phenomenologists had to struggle with several rival explanatory schemes in psychology. The most important among them were physiological psychology (of various sorts) and psychoanalysis. Both of these scientific projects tried to minimize the importance of consciousness in the explanation of the mind, the first by treating consciousness as some sort of epiphenomenal outcome of brain and other nervous processes, the second by describing it as a blind domain, driven by underlying mental acts to which consciousness itself has no access. Interestingly, however, phenomenology did not ignore these two competing explanatory schemes; on the contrary, it entered into manifold discussion with them, trying to establish more and more precisely the “division of scientific labour” among these three approaches. Evidence of this engagement is plentiful. With respect to physiological psychology, the discussion goes as far back as Franz Brentano, who tried to combine his “descriptive psychology”, also called “descriptive phenomenology”, with “genetic psychology”, that is, physiological psychology; and it has had a long and complex history, up to the most recent papers published in the journal *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*. With respect to psychoanalysis, phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty and Ricœur engaged in detail with the thought of Freud (who, by the way, had been a student of Brentano); there have also been more recent attempts to combine these two traditions, for example by Lohmar (2012). However, as shown by Mauro Antonelli, the first ecumenical hero in this history, who combined in a harmonious way all three disciplines—that is, phenomenology, physiological psychology, and psychoanalysis—was Vittorio Benussi.

In reading Antonelli's book, one comes to realize that Benussi, who is described as an "*Einzelgänger*" (p. 238), is a figure as important as he is unknown. Antonelli very nicely combines detailed analysis of Benussi's philosophy of mind with description of the historical and scientific background in which Benussi developed his work. Benussi's life was rich, but also "tragic", as Antonelli emphasizes. Born in Trieste in 1878, Benussi moved to Graz at the age of 18, where he studied with and was influenced by Meinong, and through him by Brentano, with whom Meinong had studied. In Graz, Benussi did not have a permanent academic position: he was a temporary assistant in Meinong's psychology laboratory and worked at the university library to earn enough money to live; but with access to Meinong's laboratory, becoming even its "*de facto* director" (p. 112), he developed his own research agenda. After Trieste was absorbed by Italy following the First World War, he became an Italian citizen, and as a result he lost his position as a librarian in Graz, and was forced to move to Padua. He then fell into a deep depression, despite being hired as a professor at the University of Padua soon after arriving in the city. He committed suicide in 1927 at the age of forty-nine by drinking cyanide, just as in a dream years earlier.

After a short but useful introduction (ch. 1), which explains the *raison d'être* for a monograph on Benussi, Antonelli presents the state of the art in psychology in the German-speaking world at the end of the 19th century and provides a brief overview of Brentanian and Meinongian philosophy and psychology (ch. 2). Following these helpful chapters of contextualization, and a biographical sketch of Benussi (ch. 3), Antonelli enters into the details of Benussi's work and impressive research program. Benussi is mostly known for having developed a theory of *Gestalt*. He was a member of the so-called "Graz School" of *Gestalt* theory, which was opposed to the "Berlin School" of Wolfgang Köhler and his associates. *Gestalten* are, roughly speaking, complex but unitary entities based on a series of elements, to which, however, they are not reducible; for example, a melody is a *Gestalt*, which is based on but not reducible to the series of sounds that compose it. Benussi emphasized the importance of subjective activity in the production of *Gestalten*, whereas the Berlin School had an objectivist account of them (see ch. 4.3 and 4.6, which present in detail Benussi's views, including his evolution on the topic, due in part to objections from the Berlin Gestaltists). However, as clearly shown by Antonelli, Benussi's research extended far beyond Gestalt theory; among the topics on which he worked were the classification of mental acts, the distinction between intentional content and object, sensory illusions, judgments and

“assumptions” (or “pseudo-judgments”), the theory of “productive presentations” (which explains, among others things, the constitution of *Gestalten*), the relation between emotions and cognition, and time-consciousness (ch. 4.4); beyond these rather classical themes of Brentanian and Meinongian psychology (ch. 4.2), but also of Würzburgian *Denkpsychologie*, another source of inspiration for him, Benussi worked on testimony, including lie detection (ch. 4.7), unconscious mental phenomena, including their relation to dreams (ch. 4.5 and 5.4), and the influence of the body on emotions (ch. 5.2), as well as mental analysis (ch. 5.1) and hypnosis (ch. 5.3), these themes being mostly develop in his later, Padua period, perhaps due to the fact that he had no laboratory allowing him to continue his work on sensation and *Gestalt* (p. 261). On all these themes, the reader will find original and highly interesting developments, due first to Benussi’s careful experimentations and analyses, founded on methodological reflections about psychology and its relation to philosophy (ch. 4.1), and second to Antonelli’s clear and detailed reconstruction, made possible by an impressive knowledge of Benussi’s work, including his *Nachlass* (which is presented at the end of the volume, along with a bibliography and a list of the lecture courses that Benussi delivered at the universities of Graz and Padua), and by a rare sense of synthesis. The Conclusion (ch. 6) shows that Benussi’s work could be applied to draw interesting connections between phenomenology and enactivism on the one hand, and contemporary neurosciences, biology, and pragmatics on the other.

Obviously, it is impossible in this review to address all of the topics listed above. I would like to focus on one aspect of Benussi’s work, namely, his account of emotions, which will also be the occasion to discuss some crucial methodological points that he defends about psychology. In the Brentanian tradition, an important psychological thesis, which is not based on any empirical-inductive generalization, but is meant to be an *a priori* truth, is that no emotion can take place without an underlying presentation: emotions are all *about* something, or have an object, and this object is provided to them by a presentation on which they, thus, depend. Interestingly, this thesis is attacked by Benussi, who holds explicitly that such a view is a mere philosophical speculation (pp. 277–278). His position is based on specific empirical findings, as he wanted psychology to rely on experience, and thus adopted a “theoretical minimalism” (pp. 145–147, Antonelli quoting an expression from Sadi Marhaba); in this respect, according to Antonelli, Benussi’s approach is to be placed somewhere between the philosophical phenomenology of Husserl and the experimental phenomenology of Stumpf (p. 320).

What then was Benussi's empirical ground for his thesis of the non-intentionality of emotions? He applied his "analytic" method in psychology, the idea being that the mental life is a "harmonious coordination of autonomous elementary functions" (as Benussi puts it) that one can "disarticulate", pretty much on the model of vivisection (p. 262). One of the tools that Benussi used for performing these vivisections was hypnosis. Now, one state to which he was able to lead the persons on whom he was testing his hypotheses was that of "basic sleep", a state in which, supposedly, subjects had their "conscious intellectual life" interrupted while being still able to have some specific feelings. Once put in these states, the subjects were suggestible, and Benussi would invite them to have specific emotions, such as hate. When they came back to consciousness, they were asked to report what they experienced. Now, according to their testimonies, they did indeed experience specific emotions such as hate, but given the absence of intellectual awareness these emotions were deprived of any object (p. 278). In fact, the test subjects reported a series of "kinaesthetic and muscle sensations", which Benussi apparently took to be constitutive of emotions. All this was proof, for Benussi, that intentionality is not necessary to emotions, and thus that the philosophical thesis that emotions are based on an underlying presentation is speculative. Note that Benussi defended the view that emotions might be intimately linked with an "organic-visceral sensitivity" (as Antonelli puts it, p. 315), to the extent that they might be generated by viscera and other organs, including the lungs (pp. 303-304); as such, they would be the product of a "physiological unconscious" (p. 316). Benussi was thus connecting the mind closely to the body, and through it to the evolution of the species; in this, as Antonelli emphasizes, Benussi anticipated various contemporary theories, notably those of Antonio Damasio and Jaak Panksepp, and evolutionism more broadly.

These considerations about emotion are particularly interesting, as Benussi's views anticipate various contemporary hypotheses and debates. They also seem to develop an account of emotions very much like that of William James, for whom emotions are feelings of bodily processes. Now, in contemporary philosophy, the Jamesian account of emotions has been challenged in favour of a model which defends the intentionality of emotions. (For a good overview on contemporary theories of emotions, see [Scarantino and DeSousa 2018](#).) It would be interesting to compare Benussi's views on emotions with those of contemporary philosophers, which Antonelli does not do, despite his general willingness to make such comparisons with more recent thinkers.

Independently of this, however, a question that is raised by this theoretical conflict about emotions is that of the delimitation of the scope of Benussi's research. Benussi criticizes speculative approaches to the philosophy of mind and praises empirical inquiries. However, the people with whom Antonelli compares him—not just Husserl, but also Brentano and Stumpf—all agree on one important point: they admit *a priori* truths in philosophy of mind, and they are very careful — especially Husserl—to distinguish this “eidetic phenomenology”, which is about the nature or essence of mental acts and states, from empirical psychology, which is devoted to the study of the mental life of a determinate natural species (e.g. human beings). Benussi's attraction to empirical research might have led him to neglect this distinction too much. Indeed, the distinction does not play a major role in Antonelli's book. Keeping this distinction in mind, however, leads to a more accurate determination of the scope of one's psychological research, since it allows one to distinguish in one's inquiries between what belongs to a mental phenomenon as such, and what belongs to it insofar as it is implemented in a certain kind of living being. This might have important consequences for the way one describes and understands a given phenomenon. As regards emotions, couldn't one say that the feelings Benussi is pointing to are not themselves the emotion of, say, hate, but merely some bodily impressions that human beings contingently co-experience while feeling hate? In that case, what Benussi's subjects are reporting are these feelings, which they confuse with hate properly speaking simply because they are concomitant, while hate as such, by its very nature or essence, has another structure, being object-directed.

Such interrogations can be extended to all dimensions of psychology, and were in fact extended in this way by Husserl and others. As Antonelli shows, Benussi developed, in parallel to Husserl, a genetic phenomenology which studies how the subject passively and unconsciously constitutes the identity of perceptual objects despite constant perceptual variations, organizes the perceptual field, produces *Gestalten*, etc. But here too, Husserl pointed out the possibility of an *a priori* knowledge, since these processes have their own essential rules, which are independent of being instantiated in this or that natural species (see e.g. Husserl's *Passive Synthesis*, Hua 9, 121.34–123.28, and Elmar Holenstein's (1972, 22–25) study on association of ideas in Husserl). In sum, a question that remains open when reading Antonelli's book, in the discussion of emotions and elsewhere, is whether Benussi's criticism of “speculative” philosophy goes too strongly in the opposite direction, by blurring an important distinction found among other phenomenologists of

his time. And behind this question is the more fundamental one of whether it is legitimate to accept something like a “philosophical psychology” which supposedly has its own proper task that is distinct from that of empirical psychology. Perhaps Benussi underestimated the importance of this issue.

But these reflections should not distract us from the most important point: Antonelli’s book is a fascinating, well-informed, and admirably clear study which should be read by everyone interested in the history of psychology and phenomenology. It also extends the canon in the philosophy of mind by rehabilitating an unduly neglected figure who managed to combine, long before others, the theoretical insights of phenomenology, physiological psychology, and psychoanalysis. There is no doubt that Vittorio Benussi’s theoretical project remains highly relevant.

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