

THE GRAZ VARIABLE IN EXPERIMENTAL PHENOMENOLOGY

Comments on I. Versteegen, *Mona Lisa's Smile*¹

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The Battlefield

I almost entirely concur with Versteegen's analysis of experimental phenomenology in Italy, its origins, its development, and its potential role in the contemporary science of perception.

I would emphasise in particular that for many years *experimental phenomenology* (the expression was originally coined by Michotte) in Italy (KANIZSA 1991; BOZZI 1989; MASSIRONI 1998, 57-61) was characterized by a substantial ambiguity which Versteegen well describes. I refer to the impossible complementarity between GIBSONian realism, which is essentially reductionist and in fact much dissimilar from Koffka's positions, and a 'moderate constructivism', as I would call the position of the MEINONGians (ALBERTAZZI 2001b). In the course of the years, this theoretical and terminological ambiguity has given rise to a variety of different claims: for example, the claim advanced for a naïve physics (once again a derived expression) of Aristotelian type, and therefore anti-Galilean as to the primary qualities, mixed with tendencies deriving from classical commonsense empiricism and with analytic infiltrations. These claims are too many for a single theory.

To tell the truth, the entire tradition of thought extending from BRENTANO to Italian experimental phenomenology is littered with theoretical misunderstandings, beginning with the Koffka-BENUSSI controversy (BENUSSI 1912).

Referring the reader to my previous publications (ALBERTAZZI 2001a, b; 2003) for detailed analysis, here I shall concentrate on the following points:

1. The categorial structure at the origin of phenomenology and its experimental derivations, because this may shed light on certain subsequent misunderstandings which have involved both its philosophical and experimental development, as well as the type of realism in question.
2. The main tenets of the Graz school, which have frequently been cited by Italian experimental phenomenology, both positively (BOZZI) and negatively (Luccio), but which have often been misinterpreted, also because of the influence exerted by METZGER (METZGER 1941).

¹ VERSTEEGEN, Ian (2005): *Mona Lisa's Smile. The Place of Experimental Phenomenology within Gestalt Theory. Gestalt Theory* 27 (2), 91-106.

Descriptive Psychology as an Exact Science

The theory that gave origin to phenomenology can be summed up as an attempt to develop FECHNERs *inner psychophysics*: in fact, the *units of sensation (jnd) of external psychophysics* are replaced with *units of inner presentation* given in the time of presentness. BRENTANO called them *perceptively noticeable parts (jnp)*, localized and qualified in phenomenal space-time (BRENTANO 1995a, 1981; 1988; BRENTANO 1982; ALBERTAZZI 2005, Ch. 4). In short, it is not to Husserl that we need to turn for the original framework of the theory, but to Aristotle and to an *empirical/descriptive* and *experimental* psychology of the Brentanian tradition.

Secondly, as shown by BRENTANO's theory of continua, concerns the original and immediate stratum of experience, that of the phenomenal appearances or actual presentations, which precisely because they are actual, have the immediate nature of *evident* and, as such 'objective', presentations. This is obviously not psychophysical objectivism, because its essential components are the content changes due to the *subjective completion* of the intentional structure, also at the primary level. This type of completion should not be immediately understood in the top-down sense. Moreover, the space-time dimension of phenomenal appearances has its proper characteristics as to velocity, direction, distance, boundary, qualities, etc., and as such differs from NEWTONian mechanics and classical external psychophysics (ALBERTAZZI 2002a, b).

I wish not to complicate the discussion of the types of realism without good reason, but BRENTANO's *immanentist realism* indicates that appearances are not separable from the ongoing perceptive and/or mental process of which they are correlates (or immanent objects). BENUSSI's distinction, which KANIZSA inherited, between *perceptive presentation* ('met') and *mental presentation* ('absent', i.e. merely 'thought') closely matched BRENTANO's original idea (BRENTANO 1995a). These are two layers of the ontological stratum of the intentional presentation. As we know, KANIZSA refrained from pronouncing on their inner continuity as formulated by BENUSSI (ALBERTAZZI 2003).

Firstly, this conception does not deny the existence of transcendent objects; it only denies that one can come into *direct* contact with stimuli – which it regards, given the existing correlation, as highly probabilistic. BRENTANO, for example, looked with favour on the epistemological hypotheses of Lord Kelvin (ALBERTAZZI 2005, Ch. 8). Secondly, it stresses the importance of what has rightly described as propaedeutic for psychological research if it is understood as the *descriptive analysis of the structure of appearances and their mereological articulation*. Unfortunately, the development of extensional mereology in the analytic tradition (SIMONS 1987) has been unable to clarify, even less to model, the part/whole relation constituting the intentional reference, not least because it takes the 'part' as its primitive, not the 'whole', which is instead the basis for a descriptive psychology (BRENTANO 1995b).

Moreover, descriptive psychology has undergone experimental development and cannot be considered *a science isolated* from other types of research, both psychophysical and neuronal. The analyses respectively performed in the laboratories of Graz and Berlin have been its immediate complement.

The Graz School

Despite the development of the two branches of *Gestaltpsychologie* in the early 1900s – that at Graz being generally little known – I would not say that the original programme of descriptive psychology has been fully accomplished. The analyses of the nature of subjective space by the Berlin school, and those of the nature of subjective time by the Graz school, seem to have been entirely forgotten by contemporary research. Still today, in fact, we lack a theory of the time of presentness and of its internal partitions, a theory of phenomenal spaces, and a theory of the phenomenal continua (ALBERTAZZI 1999; 2001a, b; and forthcoming 2007), i.e. a theory of the objects of intentional reference. BENUSSI's research sought to describe the cognitive processes involved in the *dynamic* (i.e. in the phases) of the actual presentation, and hence the nature of the relations among presentative contents, but was not continued by his pupils of the second generation. Indeed, an article published by KANIZSA in the 1950s expressly stated that it is not possible to analyse phases in the presentation (KANIZSA 1952). A crucial aspect of the Graz theory of production, this point one of the causes of controversy with the Berliners, and it was resumed amid the many positions taken up in Italian Gestaltism. In retrospect, one may say that BENUSSI's influence on MUSATTI is evident and easily demonstrated, especially in the early period of his research, whilst KANIZSA encountered the Graz school's theories mainly through METZGER, besides MUSATTI.

The majority of the contradictory points of view on the Grazian heritage in Italian Gestaltism are probably due to two factors:

1. The oblivion that surrounds the *philosophical theory of objects* and the *psychological theory of production* of the MEINONG school, these being 'two sides of the same coin', so to speak, but to be kept carefully distinct because they refer to different aspects of reality (ALBERTAZZI 2001a).
2. The failure to resolve the *theoretical conflict* between the two schools of Gestalt, with the ambiguities that have resulted from it.

As I have noted elsewhere regarding Graz's psychological theories in particular, METZGER makes several references to the theory of production in his *Psychologie*, although he seems to have misunderstood some of its crucial aspects. For example, he likens it to the theory of *mnesic traces* (as the sole cause of modification in the perceptive content), making references to MEINONG (1904), BENUSSI (1914) and MUSATTI (1931), and he lumps productive activity, subjective stance (*Einstellung*) and theory of attention together: in short, the theory of production is only a theory to support the 're-elaboration' or 'interpretation' of sense data. In both cases, however, METZGER inserts the theory of production into an HELMHOLTZian context extraneous to it.

When discussing the maintenance of unity in articulated psychic formations, METZGER again cites the theory of production as an example of a theory which supports the presence of a 'connecting' element among the parts of a whole, making express reference to MEINONG and BENUSSI. According to METZGER's interpretation, the subjective activity envisaged by the theory of production consists of 'intervention' by the subject in cohesion relationships among the parts (in the Meinongian sense of 'real relations:' see MEINONG 1891). In this case too, however, METZGER identifies pro-

ductive activity with attention *tout court*, but intentional reference - also in the Meinongian development given to it by the theory of production - does not entail the presence of an 'Ego' already constituted as the centre of direction of attention. If this is a matter of attention and different phases (or of different types of attention in different phases), they cannot all be attributed to forms of complete awareness because they are *structural components* of the actual presentation and of its 'objects' (for contemporary and independent experimental development see e.g. the work by RENSINK 2000).

However, as said, the issue is a complex one, and it is perhaps the theoretical Meinongian roots of the problem that account for many aspects of the Graz branch of Gestalt that still remain unexplained. The matter is of theoretical importance as it regards not only the history of the Graz school but also contemporary debate in the cognitive sciences concerning, for example, the antithesis between an ecological theory of perception (GIBSON 1979) and a theory of perception as inference (ROCK 1983) – also propounded in Italian experimental phenomenology – and more in general the problem of a naïve physics in artificial intelligence (McCARTHY, HAYES 1969; HOBBS, MOORE 1985).

I believe that if experimental phenomenology is to have a future, it must address two fundamental issues implicit in its DNA:

1. Categorical clarification of perceptive and mental phenomena *at the theoretical level*.
2. Consideration of the results obtained in psychophysics and brain science, with regard to both *interpretation* of their findings and the guiding role that experimental phenomenology may provide for them.

At the moment, it does not seem that these two challenges have been clearly visualized; even less have they been firmly addressed. The risk is that experimental phenomenology will be absorbed by the other sciences and eventually disappear, once and for all.

Abstract

The paper concentrates on the categorical structure at the origin of phenomenology and its experimental derivations, and on the main tenets of the Graz school, arguing that this may shed light on certain subsequent misunderstandings which have involved both its philosophical and experimental development, as well as the type of *realism* in question.

Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag fokussiert auf die kategoriale Struktur, die den Ursprung der Phänomenologie und ihrer experimentellen Entwicklungen ausmacht, und auf die Grundkonzepte der Grazer Schule. Eine solche Sicht könnte dazu beitragen, bestimmte Missverständnisse, die ihre sowohl philosophischen als auch experimentellen Entwicklungen verkomplizieren, sowie auch die Frage der Natur des implizierten *Realismus* zu klären.

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