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CONTENT AND OBJECT. FROM PSYCHOLOGY TO METAPHYSICS

1. The Distinction between Content and Object

Twardowski gives in the first section of his treatise on the content and object of presentations a quote from Höfler’s Logic. Höfler, in reaction to the Kantian thesis that we can never know anything about the things in themselves, argues that the word “object” is ambiguous. On the one hand, it may indicate the object to which the act is directed, and which exists in itself (an sich), or, as he also puts it, which is assumed to be independent of the act; on the other hand, it may indicate the object existing “in” us, the more or less approximating “picture” of the real object. This “quasi-picture” or sign is the content of the act. This content is also called the “immanent or intentional object” of the act (Höfler 1890, §6, p. 7). The distinction as it is meant in logic and psychology should be independent of metaphysical claims about being as such (das an sich Seiende; idem). Although Höfler does not say more about the distinction, all of Höfler’s theses are endorsed by Twardowski. Both for Höfler and Twardowski, the distinction has to be made by every philosopher, although each philosopher may give a different account of the ontological status of the act’s content and object. The distinction is philosophically neutral, and is, as a psychological distinction, prior to any philosophical theory. Although Twardowski starts with a psychological account of the distinction, he is also interested in metaphysical questions, and in the philosophical arguments for it. The question what the ontological status of the object of our acts is, is not neglected by Twardowski. At first sight it may seem that contradictory claims are made concerning the ontological status of the object. On the one hand, the object is said to be

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1 It is especially the first edition of the Logik that is relevant here. The book is written with the co-operation of Meinong.
a phenomenon, a counterpart to the act of thinking; on the other hand, objects are claimed to be independent of the act of thought. These two claims are made, though, from two different points of view. If one separates the psychological from the metaphysical point of view, it is possible to combine these seemingly contradictory theses, as we will see below.

Twardowski introduces the distinction between act, content and object in analogy with the three functions of a “name,” as we have seen in II.2. According to Twardowski, philosophers have often neglected the distinction between content and object of presentations, partly because one may use the phrase “presented object,” or “something presented,” for both the object and the content of the act. Twardowski disambiguates the phrase by means of the linguistic distinction between attributive and modifying adjectives introduced in the former chapter. According to Twardowski:

[A] determination is called attributive or determining if it completes, enlarges ... the meaning of the expression to which it is attached. A determination is modifying if it completely changes the original meaning of the name to which it is attached (Twardowski 1894b, p. 11).

This does not mean that, according to Twardowski, the meaning of the expression type changes. It is rather that he is speaking of the meaning of a particular occurrence of a term, that is, the meaning of the term in this particular context. The meaning of the expression in the context of a modifying term is different from the meaning it has in more standard contexts. As Twardowski follows Brentano’s existential account of judgement, one may give the following analysis of the distinction: If $A$ is an attributive term, and $B$ is a noun, the inference from $(A \, B)$ + to $(B)$ + is valid. Given that “German” is an attributive term, one can infer that there is a pistol from the premise that there is a German pistol. A German pistol is a certain kind of pistol. If $A$ is a modifying term, the inference from $(A \, B)$ + to $(B)$ + is invalid. “[I]f one says “dead man,” one uses a modifying adjective, since a dead man is not a man” (p. 11).

Some words can be used attributively in one context, and modifying in another, as the word “false” in, respectively, “false judgement” and “false gold.” A false judgement is a kind of judgement, but false gold is not a kind of gold. Adjectives like “presented” and “painted” can be used in both ways. One may speak of a “painted landscape” in two senses: one may speak about a landscape near Amsterdam that is painted. Here “painted” is used attributively. One may also speak of a “painted landscape” when speaking about

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2 Der Zusatz ‘gemalt’, in diesem Sinne zum Worte ‘Landschaft’ hinzugefügt, modifiziert die Bedeutung des Wortes ‘Landschaft’ keineswegs; er ist ein wahrhaft determinierender Zusatz, welcher angibt, dass die Landschaft in einer bestimmten Relation zu einem Bilde steht, in einer Relation, welche die Landschaft ebensowenig aufhören macht, eine Landschaft zu sein, als... (Twardowski 1894a, p. 14).