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## TWARDOWSKI ON CONTENT AND MEANING

**SUMMARY:** Kazimierz Twardowski elaborated an original conception of intentionality in his habilitation thesis, *On the Content and Object of Presentations*, in 1894. He gives a crucial place to the notion of content, as the basis of any presentation. This allows him to offer a solution to the problem of objectless presentations. But I will focus here on a property he attributes to content, that is, its ability to convey meaning. Outside the proper scope of philosophy of language, he provides a conception of meaning that does not focus on reference but rather on designation. His theory does not account for the Fregean distinction between sense and reference, so I will propose a comparison between the two philosophers' conceptions of meaning.

**KEYWORDS:** Twardowski, meaning, content, Frege, intentionality.

### Introduction

Few people would deny that content and meaning are related, even linked. In propositions, for example, the meaning conveyed can be closely associated with the content of the proposition. But one could also argue that a difference between the two is that content is situated *within*. The content is, as stated by the very definition of the word, contained or included in something, whereas meaning may be elsewhere: it is what is expressed. Our meanings do have contents, but do our contents have meanings? These terms possess specific definitions that

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evolved from a long philosophical tradition, one that precedes the establishment of logic as we currently know it. In this paper, I would like to offer insights based on the work of the Polish philosopher Kazimierz Twardowski. He was a student of Franz Brentano and developed a new conception of intentionality that places the content of a presentation front and center. With his new conception also comes a new dynamic for conceiving the relationship between the subject, the world, and the meaning ascribed to it. But the catch here is that Twardowski's theory is more than a theory of content: it can also be read as a theory of meaning. Indeed, even if he was not a philosopher of language *per se*, he founded his approach in the study of language. Moreover, to quote Jan Woleński, one will find Twardowski at the source of the intense Polish interest in semantics (Woleński, 2009, p. 44)<sup>1</sup>—which would later extend to the Polish School of Logic. In this article, I will examine several acceptations for the words “meaning” and “reference” as they are used by philosophers of different traditions.

This paper will consider Twardowski's first contribution to philosophy. Indeed, I will solely focus on the content theory he developed in his habilitation thesis *On the Content and Object of Presentations* (Twardowski, 1894), with some references to later papers. I will begin by retracing Twardowski's steps, departing from his Brentanian roots, and to this end I will summarize the traditional conception of intentionality that stems from Brentano, in order to highlight the emergence of the content of presentations. Then, I will take an interest in Twardowski's approach to meaning to show how he incorporated the study of language in his philosophy. I will see that the Polish philosopher offers insights on meaning in a broad, almost vague, sense that is intertwined with his conception of content. This will lead us to examining this conception of meaning, more dynamic and focused on use and expression, but deeply connected to the subject. Finally, I will compare Twardowski and Frege's ideas. I will do so by comparing their respective conceptions of meaning, that is by “translating” Twardowski's insight into the Fregean lexicon.

### 1. The Brentanian Conception of Presentations

Twardowski's ideas about content are part of his original conception of intentionality, understood as the relationship between a conscious subject and the world. This relationship is mental in nature: one cannot comprehend anything in the world without first constructing a mental presentation of it. This conception of intentionality stems from Franz Brentano, whose teaching and mentorship served as foundations for Twardowski's ideas; he attended Brentano's lectures, and the Austrian philosopher was his unofficial PhD advisor.<sup>2</sup> The philosophical

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<sup>1</sup> Additionally, Maria van der Schaar titled her book on Twardowski *A Grammar for Philosophy* (2016).

<sup>2</sup> His official PhD advisor was Robert Zimmerman, but for administrative reasons only (Huemer, 2019).

kinship, then, is no surprise. Twardowski began his habilitation thesis, *On the Content and Objects of Presentations*, by quoting Brentano: “It is one of the best positions of psychology, hardly contested by anyone, that every mental phenomenon intends an immanent object” (Twardowski, 1894, p. 1). But this acknowledgment of the tradition serves as a way to emancipation: the rest of his habilitation thesis is an original proposition about the content and the object of presentations. To better understand the originality of Twardowski’s ideas, let us briefly consider Brentano’s intentionality. More precisely, I will only consider Brentano’s first conception of intentionality. There were changes in Brentano’s position over the years,<sup>3</sup> but I focus on what was his standard conception when Twardowski wrote his habilitation thesis. Intentionality, or in Brentano’s own words *intentional inexistence*, or *directionality*, is developed in the first edition of *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (Brentano, 1874). The following quotation is the most famous passage:

Every mental phenomenon [*Phänomen*] is characterised by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) inexistence [*Inexistenz*] of an object [*Gegenstandes*], and what we might call, though not wholly unambiguously, reference to content [*die Beziehung auf einen Inhalt*], direction toward an object [*Objekt*] (which is not to be understood here as meaning a thing [*Realität*]), or immanent objectivity [*immanente Gegenständlichkeit*]. (Brentano, 1874, pp. 124–125)

The fundamental property of psychic phenomena is actually double: they are directed toward something that is a specific object. The object here is what is presented before the mind. As we can see from Brentano’s use, the German possesses two words for “object”, depending on its “location”: traditionally, *Objekt* is the internal object, presented in the mind, and *Gegenstand* is the external object, which is presented. For the early Brentano, the *Objekt* is immanent, meaning it is mental by nature. This conception stems from the scholastic tradition, in which objects can only exist *in* the mind (hence the in-existence): i.e., they possess intentional existence and not real existence. For the early Brentano, the object is not in the world, it is not a *Realität*, it is in the conscious mind. That is the case for all three kinds of psychic phenomena—presentation, judgment, and belief, i.e., for thinking in general (Smith, 1994, p. 60). It is a serious position that he will himself reject in time. Indeed, in the foreword to the aforementioned 1911 edition of *Psychology*, he will write:

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<sup>3</sup> In the years following his self-imposed exile from Austria, Brentano continued writing his *Psychology*. In 1911, he published the next part of the book under the title “Classification of Psychic Phenomena”, which comprises Chapters 5 to 9 of the Second Book, as well as Appendix I. And, in 1924, Oskar Kraus published a new version that comprised the 1974 and 1911 editions plus some other texts of his choosing.

One of the most important innovations is that I am no longer of the opinion that mental relation can have something other than a thing [*Reales*] as its object [*Objekt*]. In order to justify this new point of view, I had to explore entirely new questions, for example, I had to go into the investigations of the modes of presentations. (Brentano, 1874, p. xxiii)

Even if this change proves irrelevant for Twardowski's conception of the object of presentation—because, in 1896, he drew on Brentano's early work—it is worth mentioning it to stress the fact that Brentano's first conception of intentionality had loose ties to the real world.

As I have detailed, this early idea of intentionality is mainly a relationship between a subject and an object; nevertheless, the notion of content is present. We can summarize this with the idea that when one thinks, one must think of something. Indeed, intentionality, as a property of every mental act, implies that the object possesses an intentional existence, and, at the same time, intentionality is a reference [*Beziehung auf*] to a content, direction toward an object. Let us add that Brentano's distinction between content and direction is not always very clear.<sup>4</sup> The notion of content is not really mentioned in *Psychology*,<sup>5</sup> and more importantly, it is not as critical as it will be in the writings of Brentano's students, like Höfler, Husserl, Meinong, and Twardowski (Jacquette, 2006, p. 10; p. 29, Footnote 5; p. 77, Footnote 24). Now, there are two possible interpretations of intentionality as a reference; i.e., there are two ways of interpreting the comma in the famous passage about intentionality, and hence two ways of thinking about the relationship between reference and intentionality. We can consider the comma as a means of juxtaposing two items, which is the traditional interpretation—in this case, reference and direction are alternative formulations of the same matter. Or we can consider the comma as a mean of separating the two items, as Hamid Taieb (2017) does—in this case, a mental act is directed toward something, and it can *also* refer to it. Brentano's first conception of intentionality is relational in nature, in the sense that both parts of the equation are directly related

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<sup>4</sup> There is actually a note in the English edition of *Psychology* stating that in the famous passage, Brentano uses “content” and “object” synonymously (Brentano, 1874, p. 68, Footnote 9).

<sup>5</sup> The later editors of Brentano's *Naschlass* succeeded in erasing the notion of content from his texts (Fréchette, 2011; 2015). This is not of importance for any immediate student of Brentano, who had access to untampered texts.

to one another.<sup>6</sup> This is the foundation of the two ways of approaching reference, as Taieb supports his claim by translating the German “*Beziehung auf*” as “relation” and not “reference” (Taieb, 2017, p. 121). We must keep in mind here that, in any case, the now widely accepted conception of reference comes from the work of Gottlob Frege, and it does not make much sense to apply it to Brentano’s conception. For example, Brentano’s PhD thesis, entitled *Von der Mannigfachen Bedeutung des Seienden nach Aristoteles*, is translated into English as *On the Several Senses of Being in Aristotle*. There is no evidence that one ought to distinguish between sense and meaning, and reference and denotation, in studying the early Brentano because *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* were not (yet) used with the distinction Frege imposes on language. So we can say that his characterization of presentations as reference to a content is a way to describe the movement of the mind toward what it is thinking about.

Now that I have briefly summarized early Brentano’s take on intentionality, I will examine and assess Twardowski’s original take on his mentor’s ideas.

## 2. Twardowski’s New Intentionality

Twardowski develops his own conception of intentionality in his habilitation thesis. His main deviation from the work of Brentano is his conception of the relationship upon which intentionality is based. The conscious subject and the object remain, but he expands the domain of content.<sup>7</sup> He does so very clearly by titling his first section *Act, Content and Object of the Presentation* (Twardowski, 1894, p. 1). The order of the terms provides us with insight into the respective

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<sup>6</sup> This will change after 1905 when Brentano stops considering mental reference to be a relationship (Boccaccini, 2010, p. 13ff.). See also *The Origin of Our Knowledge of Right and Wrong*:

The common feature of everything psychological, often referred to, unfortunately, by the misleading term “consciousness”, consists in a relation that we bear to an object. The relation has been called intentional; it is a relation to something which may not be actual but which is presented as an object. (Brentano, 1889, pp. 8–9, emphasis added)

The original passage is also provided here, as Chisholm’s translation changes the structure of the sentences:

Der gemeinsame Charakterzug alles Psychischen besteht in dem, was man häufig mit einem leider sehr mißverständlichen Ausdruck Bewußtsein genannt hat, d. h. in einem Subjektischen Verhalten, in einer, wie man sie bezeichnete, intentionalen Beziehung zu etwas, was vielleicht nicht wirklich, aber doch innerlich gegenständlich gegeben ist. (Brentano, 2014, p. 16)

<sup>7</sup> In fact, Twardowski was not the first to introduce a distinction between the object and content of a presentation; similar ideas can be found in the work of Bolzano, Zimmermann, Höfler, and Kerry, but not as elaborated (Cavallin, 1997). Meinong will develop his own later (for details about Meinong’s and Höfler’s reception of Twardowski’s content, see Fréchette, 2011).

significance given to each part and on Twardowski's conception. In his words, presentation is, above all, a conscious act on the part of a subject. It is the ground upon which all other mental acts rest. Twardowski insists on the fact—which is a foreshadowing of his general conception of philosophy—that the term “presentation” is ambiguous: “the expression ‘the presented’ is in a similar fashion ambiguous [*zweideutig*] as is the expression ‘presentation’” (Twardowski, 1894, p. 2). He explains that when one talks about presentation, one can understand it as any of the following:

- (1) the act of presenting [*die Vorstellungsakte*],
- (2) the operation of presenting [*die Tätigkeit des Vorstellens*],
- (3) what is presented [*das Vorgestellte*],
- (4) the content of the presentation [*Vorstellungsinhalt*].

But there is a philological ambiguity to resolve here. This breakdown into four parts is apparent in the original German version of the text, with two parts, each with two subparts; the French translation and the Polish version of the text reflect this, but the English translation does not and omits (2).<sup>8</sup> The two parts are separated by coordinator words (respectively, *bal*/*tantôt/bqdź/sometimes*); the interpretative problem arises with the commas: are they tools for juxtaposition or for separation? The English translator, Reinhardt Grossmann, seems to think the commas are for juxtaposition, as he does not translate *die Tätigkeit des Vorstellens* at all, but only keeps *die Vorstellungsakte*. In his understanding, the operation and the act are one and the same for Twardowski. Even if one can object to the liberty he took with his omission, one has to admit he was right to do so, as Twardowski indeed uses both terms synonymously in other parts of the text.<sup>9</sup> The point here is that, for the Polish philosopher, presentation is more of an act than a relationship, because it is above all a mental act. This is a big step: with this idea, the old principle of mental phenomena is set aside to make room for activity in a very new way. This is part of the deliberate movement Twardowski initializes to modernize intentionality and render it more relevant to the practicality of life. Then, if operation and act are juxtapositions, the second part of the possible meaning of “presentation” must also be a juxtaposition, hence defining the content of a presentation with the idea of “what is presented”.

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<sup>8</sup> This is the only part of this article where I translated myself from German to English, because the English translation “lacks” a part of the German sentence it was translated from by Reinhardt Grossmann. See the differences in (Twardowski, 2017, p. 39) for German, and respectively, in (Twardowski, 1993, pp. 87-88) for French, (Twardowski, 1965, p. 4) for Polish, and (Twardowski, 1977, p. 1) for English.

<sup>9</sup> For example, compare (Twardowski, 1894, p. 16) with the original German (Twardowski, 2017, p. 50).

We can see that there is an issue here: if the content is what is presented, what about the object?<sup>10</sup> Any reader of Twardowski has to admit that the problem with his conception of the object of presentation is that he does not care for it. The object is only a means to describe the important part of the presentation accurately, i.e., the content. When describing the traditional view of intentionality, he mentions the immanent object and describes it as a mental, “more or less approximate, ‘picture’ of that real entity which exists ‘in’ us” (Twardowski, 1894, p. 2). The core idea is that the mental act is not directed toward an object anymore, but toward a content. There is a requalification of sorts; Twardowski insists that what was called “object” before is actually the content of the act of presentation. The object is no longer immanent but transcends the mind: “Everything that is presented through a presentation [...] we call an object” (Twardowski, 1894, p. 37). He builds on scholastic philosophy, as Brentano did, who stated that the object is *ens rationis*—the set of the things about which one can reason whether they exist or not—to show that this actually applies to the content. Twardowski does not intend to refute the previous theory of intentionality, and does not consider the previous theory to be wrong. Rather, he thinks that it failed to make an important distinction: the distinction between intentional object and object is actually a distinction between content and object. The Polish philosopher repurposes the immanent object into the content because only the content can be mental in nature. But note that the difference between object and content, for him, is real and not only conceptual (Twardowski, 1894, p. 27). This changes the whole conception of intentionality; in this new version, the mind is not directed toward an immanent object but it is directed toward content. Twardowski relies on the property of mental dependency to make the distinction: only content is mind-dependent, the object cannot be. Under this property, there is a more metaphysical problem at stake, that is, the problem of existence.

An old problem in philosophy is how to account for thoughts and judgments about things that are not real (Benoist, 2001; Chrudzinski, 2015; Jacquette, 2006). After the linguistic turn in philosophy, one would rephrase the problem in this way: how can I judge that *X* is true if *X* refers to something that has no counterpart in the real world? Brentano, following Bolzano and others (Brentano, 1874, p. 211), was adamant and insisted that there is no possibility of presentation for things that do not effectively exist in the real world. They cannot be the objects of any presentations; they can only be fantasies. But Twardowski holds a peculiar position here, because he defends a point of view opposed to the general landscape. And his solution to the problem of “objectless presentations”—which he calls *Die sogenannten “gegenstandslosen” Vorstellungen*, the so-called “objectless” presentations (Twardowski, 1894, pp. 18–26)—lies with the notion of content. For Twardowski, presentations of this kind do possess an object for the

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<sup>10</sup> Only simple objects are referred to here—general objects are left outside of our scope (for more details, see Twardowski, 1894, §15; van der Schaar, 2016, p. 79).

simple reason that without an object there can be no presentation at all. He does not place any limitation on the effective existence of said object:

Objects are either real or not real; they are either possible or impossible objects; they exist [*existieren*] or do not exist. What is in common to them all is that they are or that they can be the *object* (not the intentional one!) of a mental act. (Twardowski, 1894, p. 33)

Because objects of presentation can actually be anything, there has to be an anchor to the mind, and this is the content. It possesses in itself all that is needed to render presentation possible, even with impossible objects. The primary mode of existence is not real existence but *intentional* existence. Only intentionality is needed in order to produce a presentation. Whether the object we present actually exists or not, the content generated within the presentation possesses intentional existence. One could say that Twardowski was being pragmatic, or maybe a dreamer, looking for a means of accounting for moments when we think about fantasies without simply dismissing them as frivolous talk. This was a very novel stance when Twardowski proposed it because the tradition was that judgments were used to assert existence conditions: saying that *X* is blue meant first that *X* exists, then that *X* has the property of being blue. Adapted once again to our more contemporary views on linguistics, we can say that, with his dismissal, the Polish philosopher basically asked who cared if the truth conditions of sentences such as “I dreamed I saw a mermaid” and “I saw a mermaid” are different, or if, in fact, I could never be a mermaid. The question is not about truth or existence, it is about the fact that we do indeed present ourselves with objects that do not actually exist.

As clearly stated by many philosophers, Twardowski is one of the first to argue for a new kind of intentionality focusing on the content of a presentation instead of its object. The content is a real part of the presentation, not a conceptual distinction from the function of the object. It has its own conditions of existence, on an intentional level only, and it is mind-dependent. This concludes the more traditionally philosophical part of this paper. Let us now focus on the relationship between content and meaning. Twardowski was not a philosopher of language per se, but his work is built upon language analysis.

### 3. Finding Meaning in Language

I established the genealogy between Brentano and Twardowski because it was relevant to understanding the intentional theory of the latter, but it will not help us understand the relationship between content and meaning. If Brentano had, indeed, an idea of content as “referent”, it had very little to do with what is now understood as reference: I showed that he used “*Beziehung*”, not “*Bedeutung*”. Brentano seems to have had no interest in connecting intentionality and meaning, and especially not from what would nowadays considered a linguistic point of view. Maria van der Schaar noted that he distinguished logical



distinctions from grammatical ones (van der Schaar, 2016, p. 24), but that is the extent of his interest in language.

On the other hand, there is an acute linguistic interest to be found in Twardowski (Woleński, 2009). In this section, I will examine what he intends by “meaning”. His description of the distinction between object and content is supported by grammatical considerations. When he asserts that “everything which is designated [*was genannt wird*] is an object” (Twardowski, 1894, p. 34), he means that linguistic designation, broadly understood, is a way to understand what the object is; doing this, he intertwines the philosophical conception of the object with its linguistic counterpart. That is why he continues by adding that what is designated by nouns—or nominal groups, clauses, etc.—can be an object. Twardowski maintains that there is a coincidence between grammatical categories and the manner in which we make presentations. In other words, Twardowski shows that we speak in the same manner that we think,<sup>11</sup> even if it is not a perfect parallel—he prefers to talk about the connection between mental phenomena and the linguistic expressions that designate them as an analogy (Twardowski, 1894, p. 8). The Polish philosopher studies the grammatical category of nouns through the category of *categorematic signs*, one he took from Marty and the Scholastics. He offers this extended definition:

[C]ategorematic signs are linguistic means of designation [*sprachlichen Bezeichnungsmittel*] which are not solely co-significant [*nicht bloß mitbedeutend sind*] (like “of the father”, “about”, “nevertheless”, and the like), and which do not by themselves completely express a judgment (assertion), or a feeling, or a decision of the will, and the like (requesting, asking, commanding, etc.), but which are merely expression for presentations [*den Ausdruck einer Vorstellung bilden*]. Such names are “the founder of ethics” and “a son, who has insulted his father”. (Twardowski, 1894, p. 9, modified translation)

Hence, the category of *categorematic signs* does not exactly align with our current category of nouns. It is, at the same time, more restrictive—because it excludes means of designation that only have meaning within a context, and less restrictive—because it includes nominal groups or relative clauses. By bringing together nouns and *categorematic signs*, Twardowski does effectively exclude all grammatical items that are not proper means of designation of things, as opposed to, say, adjectives that could be interpreted as able to designate a concept, e.g., “red”. His goal is to circumscribe the categories that can fulfill the “task of nouns”, that is, to “arouse in the listener a certain content of a presentation” (Twardowski, 1894, p. 9, translation modified).<sup>12</sup> But he adds to the list of means of designation able to fulfill this task, ones that do not completely express

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<sup>11</sup> Maria Van der Schaar is also explicit about this (van der Schaar, 2016, p. 27).

<sup>12</sup> For an unknown reason, the translator from German to English translated “*Namen*” to “names” and not “nouns”, and doing so hides the grammatical impact Twardowski made. It is clear that Twardowski is interested in grammatical categories, hence in nouns.

a judgment, or a feeling, or a decision of the will. We can read here an evocation of Brentano's categories of mental acts: presentation, judgments, and acts of the will, feelings, and the rest.

Twardowski's interest in nouns comes from their grammatical nature, but also from the parallel he draws between language and representation—from now on, “noun” will be used here as he intended. Nouns exist for many things, among them some actually exist (cats, honey, astral bodies...) and some do not (mermaids, trickle-down economics, James Bond...). This means that nouns, as a category, are not actually bound by the existence, which can have some interesting philosophical implications for the objects the nouns designate. This leads us to a rather tricky part of Twardowski's “philosophy of language” because one can read here some suggestions about reference. Jocelyn Benoist does (Benoist, 2001, p. 77) when he stipulates that the Polish philosopher, with the nominal model of presentation I have described, carries a “referentiality requirement”. He means that presentations, like nouns, must have some referent at all times. Let us develop why this may be problematic, notably because this analogy is made upon the specific case of objectless presentations. Twardowski holds that nouns, like the objects of presentations, can designate things that simply exist or not, they can also refer to things that do not exist anymore (e.g., dodos), things that do not yet exist (e.g., the future), or even to things that just cannot exist (e.g., nothing). This last example is Twardowski's own, as he asserts that when one presents oneself with nothing, there still is a presentation; if that were not the case, thinking about nothing would amount to not thinking. Indeed, we do invent nouns and names to refer to the world or to dream; there is no law about inventing concepts and having new ideas, and thus, nouns to designate them. In the same way, our minds wander and we can think about virtually anything. Twardowski acknowledges this by stating that all presentations have objects, and by modifying what this object entails in order to adapt to the fact that we may think of things that do not exist. For him, the mode of existence of a noun is not dependent on the actual existence of the thing it designates, but only dependent on the fact that we use that word to refer to the world. Because the noun awakens a certain mental content in the listener (Twardowski, 1894, p. 9), it can provide intentional existence to the object it designates, whether they actually exist or not. Now, the delicate part is the assimilation of existence and reference. It may be better to retain the pair “meaning/existence” (with considerations of actual and intentional existence) than the pair “meaning/reference” for interpreting Twardowski's habilitation thesis. The Fregean distinction between sense and reference cannot apply here, as we mentioned it could not for Brentano. I will come back to the relationship between Twardowski and reference later in this paper.

Therefore, let us come back to the question of the meaning and how all of this affected Twardowski's position. We can sum up Twardowski's view with his assignation of three tasks to nouns: first, they reveal that the speaker is engaging in an act of presentation; second, they arouse in the listener a certain content; and third, they designate objects (Twardowski, 1894, §3). This also contributes to

what I called Twardowski's pragmatic approach. He reminds us that an act of expression is intentional in the philosophical sense of the term but also in the common sense of the term: we want to convey something to someone. This is where we find meaning. His suggestion is that the words we choose are directly linked not only to what we want to say, but also to what presentation we want to generate in others. When I say that I am happy, there is a double effect in the reception of my sentence: first, the listener will know that I have an emotional life, and second, he or she will understand what I mean because my words will evoke a similar presentation in them. This is made possible by conveying a meaning. Hence, Twardowski draws a parallel between the content of a presentation and the meaning of a noun: "*Dieser Inhalt ist es, den man unter der 'Bedeutung' eines Namens versteht*" (Twardowski 2017, p. 46). He repeats this in a footnote on the same page, with the same words. The English translator, Grossmann, uses "meaning" as Twardowski himself does when he quotes in English in this German text. Indeed, for a definition of meaning, Twardowski suggests following William Stanley Jevons in his *Principles of Science* (Jevons, 1873), and he quotes him: "Etymologically the meaning of a name is that which we are caused to think of when the name is used". This meaning, and in the same movement the content, has a purpose, which is to illicit something in the receiving person. There is a directionality here that starts in the mind of the speaker (later in the footnote, content is designated as *Seeleninhalt*) and ends in the mind of the listener. Oddly enough, there is no room for discussing self-consciousness or introspection. This semantic definition of meaning applies to mental content, and it is dependent on the person thinking and presenting it. Meaning is linguistic, as it is conveyed by language, but it is different from logical, objective meaning as we think of it now. Meaning, in Twardowski's terms, is psychological. Jevons' definitions may seem unsatisfactory to the modern reader, but it actually gives us all the information we need.

We are now able to understand why Twardowski suggests one should envision the distinction between the object and content of a presentation in a new way: the content is presented *in* the presentation, and the object is presented *by* the presentation. The fact that there is a content is equivalent to the fact that something becomes a presentation as a content. Twardowski believes that whether an object exists or not, there is a form of meaning attached to it, i.e., the presentation of this object evokes something in us when we think about it.

#### 4. Dynamics of Meaning

Twardowski's interest does not end with the fact that he maintains that presentations do have and convey some sort of psychological meaning. His conception of meaning associated with mental content is peculiar and interesting because it is dynamic and not fixed. Indeed, for the Polish philosopher, if content is the meaning of a noun, their relationship is not dictionary-like; it is rather a deforming mirror. When I express something, I try to evoke in my listener the

same thing I am thinking about, but there is always a possibility of distortion. Even if Twardowski's conception of presentation can fall prey to accusations of psychologism (Fisette, Fréchette, 2007), his conception of meaning has nothing to do with the nature of content. It rather stems from a pragmatic approach to our mental life. Let us circle back to the example of nouns he provided earlier: I am able to associate a specific meaning with "the founder of ethics" because I study philosophy and have learned that Aristotle is the founder of ethics. It so happens that this association corresponds to the truth, but not everybody will associate the same meaning that I do. I am not referring here to people possibly making mistakes, or discussing the foundation of ethics. I am referring to people that did not learn who Aristotle was, and moreover, that he founded ethics. My sister may know him from her memories of the books on my desk without associating him with ethics. But the association between this nominal group and this meaning, however true it might be, is contingent to education. The issue here is the inherently contingent dimension of presentation, to avoid saying the *subjective* or personal dimension. Not all presentations have the same stability in terms of meaning: "the sum of the number 2 and the number 5" is stable, but "my first love" is not. We say there is stability when the meaning is the same independently of the speaker. Twardowski is not ignorant of this problem and he offers ways around it by stipulating a necessity of *identity* between contents. The nature of the content one conveys with an expression when one makes other people present themselves with the same content one has [*der ihn selbst erfüllt*] is what must be identical, not the "content of the content" (Twardowski, 1894, p. 9).

This might appear unsatisfactory. The term "meaning" is used throughout, which is far from determinate. This lack of depth shows that Twardowski never intended to build a theory of language, but he did make many interesting comments on the relationship we have to language. Nevertheless, there is more to the theory.

Twardowski's content is a complex composed of constitutive parts (Twardowski, 1894, §11). He gives the example of a triangle:

[I]n the presentation of the triangle there are contained the presentations of the sides and of the plane. To be sure, it would be more precise to say: the presentation of the triangle contains material parts of a content through which three sides and the plane are presented. (Twardowski, 1894, p. 63)

It follows that his idea of meaning must also be composed of parts, and presumably the same parts. Those parts are articulated with each other. The example of the triangle is relatively easy because it is a mathematical object, whose parts are the elements of its definition. But what would be the parts of our previous example? The presentation of "the founder of ethics" would contain parts through which the (1) domain of ethics would be presented, and (2) in relation to it the idea that (3) someone was the first to structure it as a domain (not necessarily in that order). Those are not sub-significations, but parts of one signification that is my own and that happen to be correct, that is, that corresponds to the current state of understanding the history of philosophy. Each of those elements

can lead, more or less successfully, to the signification of “the founder of ethics”. As long as someone utters the expression, so the meaning exists, even if the person does not know philosophy.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, I may not know what you mean by “the last house on the left” but I can never think there is no meaning here. There can be incompleteness of meaning, as Twardowski stated when defining categorical signs, but there is always some existence. The good part is that this existence has nothing to do with actual reality: there is meaning to “Prince Myshkin”. It may be strange to the modern reader to think that there can be parts of meanings that are relative to one person, because we take meaning to be objective. I am not arguing here that it is not, but I would like to suggest that we actually use personal meanings all the time. For example, when learning something new in a discussion with someone, we do not check encyclopedias at every occasion. We usually consider new knowledge as true if the source is reliable, even if that means that we received somewhat distorted information. This also applies when we encounter an unknown term or expression. We do not need to run to our dictionaries, because, most of the time, we can ascribe meaning based on context. More importantly, we can later modify this meaning if we realize an incorrect ascription was made. This is why it was said that meaning is dynamic according to Twardowski, because he is pragmatic about language

We can turn to a later text that supports our interpretation. In an article entitled *On the Logic of Adjectives*, he separated adjectives according to “the division of adjectives into determining, i.e., those that *determine the meaning of nouns* or noun phrases, and modifying, i.e., those that modify them” (Twardowski, 1923, p. 141). Modifying adjectives add a characteristic (positive or negative) to the content of a presentation expressed by a noun. Those modifications or replacements, he specifies, can be adding or deleting, and they can be partial or total. He takes the example of “counterfeit” modifying the meaning of the noun “bill” by deleting the content associated with legal bills and replacing it with the content associated with illegal counterfeit money. This means that modification of a noun or phrase can transform it into something that is not the original term but is still connected to it (Poli, 1993).

But Maria van der Schaar points out a weakness in Twardowski’s theory. She argues that the necessary condition for a noun to be able to evoke a content is that the mental content must be exactly the same to the one the speaker wants to convey. According to her, this restricts Twardowski’s definition of the meaning of a noun because accidental arousal of a certain content in the listener would not belong to its meaning (van der Schaar, 2016, p. 56). This may be theoretically relevant, but it is pragmatically impossible. Her condition—the need for exactly the same content in the speaker and the listener—is impossible because we can never be assured of the extent of what we convey via language at a fine level. In

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<sup>13</sup> I consider here that people utter things that they consider as meaning bearing, or at least that they choose to speak to convey meaning. I acknowledge that it may be a disputable position.

a broad sense, obviously there is adequation, otherwise there would be no possibility of communication. But in a fine and personal way,<sup>14</sup> there is room for interpretation. Moreover, there is always room for misunderstanding; this is only sufficient to reject the necessity of perfect uniformity in both contents. Moreover, Twardowski himself rejected this necessity and took a side step with his own condition of *some* content being conveyed, i.e., an identity of nature, not content. Mutual communication is possible and happens without complete identity, because one can evoke in others mental content and mental processes which are relevant and similar to those that one deals with. Barry Smith also noted this (Smith, 1994, p. 178). Content may be received but it is also interpreted, and this is effective most of the time. Twardowski does not mention this *per se*, but it is also possible that different speakers do convey the same content against their will.

It is clear that the whole question of meaning is underlined by the more profound problem of psychologism. Twardowski suffered a critique (though unpublished) by Husserl in the form of a review of his published habilitation thesis (Husserl, 1896, pp. 349–356) that focused on his theory of content, and this led him to be very careful in his future endeavors (van der Schaar, 2016). Let us now circle back to Twardowski's account of the relationship between one object and one content. Twardowski tackles this by analyzing general presentations. He refuses the common conception of this kind of presentation as a presentation of a plurality of objects, in part because he conceives presentation as unification. But he argues that there must be a special relationship between the content and the object that makes a given pair inseparable: this object belongs to that content, and that content corresponds to this particular object (Twardowski, 1984, §12). I already stated that he considers that content and meaning are related in the sense that a content does always have meaning, even if partial. He also maintains that a difference between objects and contents lies in the fact that the first possess actual existence, and the second intentional existence. If an object does not actually exist, I can still provide a lesser form of existence when I think about it, and hence, when I ascribe meaning to it. Fundamentally, what makes the pair—any pair—inseparable here is the fact that a conscious subject renders a binding presentation. The relationship is mental in nature, whether it is between object and content, or between content and meaning. Without this requirement, it is more difficult to allow for any dynamic.

In fact, the question of the nature of meaning and its relationship to objects is important for Twardowski, probably because of his own upbringing and his own life. As a scholar of his time, he was trained extensively in Greek and Latin; we also know that he read English and he seemed proficient in French (he translated some of his work himself). As a Polish man from a cultured family living in Vienna, he used both German and Polish every day, and as a Polish man in charge of teaching in his own country, he favored Polish over German in aca-

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<sup>14</sup> As in a sort of coloring of meaning, or a relation to one's own history, not in the Wittgensteinian sense of privacy.

demia. The fact remains: he lived, spoke, and probably thought in at least two languages with two different semantic roots. The problem of meaning, as a whole, was probably a very real and very present one for him. Let us read a long footnote in a later text, *Actions and Products* (1912), that is enlightening:

It should be noted that the term “to signify” [*znaczyć*]<sup>15</sup> is itself ambiguous. When we say that some expression signifies something, it is our way of saying that it has some meaning. The term “to signify” so understood corresponds to the Latin *significare*, and the German *bedeuten*. Instead of saying that some verbal expression [...] signifies something, we may not only say that it *has* some meaning, but also that it *contains* some meaning, that some meaning *is linked with it*, that some meaning *inheres* in it, that it *expresses* some meaning. On the other hand, we have something else in mind when we use the phrase “to designate [*znaczyć*] trees, sheep”, etc. To the term *znaczyć* employed in this way corresponds to the Latin *denotare* and the German *bezeichnen*. (Twardowski, 1912, p. 123, Footnote 50)

In this footnote, we can clearly see the interest Twardowski had in signification, language, and languages. Here again he links meaning and signification to the German verb “*bedeuten*”, as he used it in *On the Content and Object of Presentations* (Twardowski, 1894). But the definition he provides for meaning still seems circular: there is meaning when some expression signifies something. The relation to content lies in the fact that he specifies that the meaning of an expression is contained by it—it is inside it. With this last consideration, we can say that, for Twardowski, meaning is what we are thinking about conveying when we express the presentations we are making.

When he wrote this text, it had been a decade since Frege had written his famous *Sense and Reference* (*Über Sinn und Bedeutung*; Frege, 1892), and this last quotation does not fail to evoke the work of the German logician. In the last part of this article, I will finally address the elephant in the (philosophical) room: the parallel between Twardowski’s theory and Frege’s theory of sense and reference.

### 5. Overview of the Difference Between Twardowski’s and Frege’s Approaches

As far as we know, Twardowski was not aware of Frege’s work, even if *Sense and Reference* had already been written when he developed his first theory of content.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Frege became popular in Poland between 1910 and 1920 (Woleński, 2009, p. 45). Moreover, Twardowski never mentions Frege in earlier texts. But, as it has become apparent throughout this paper, there are links between the two academics. I will start by examining possible sources through which Twardowski

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<sup>15</sup> This is an exact copy of the text; the foreign terms are provided and discussed by the author himself.

<sup>16</sup> Jens Cavallin suggests that there may be evidence to the contrary in “unpublished work probably written by Twardowski” (Cavallin, 1997, p. 146).



would have been able to have contact with Frege's work, however tenuous. I will then try to establish a parallel between both of their conceptions of meaning.

One can establish an initial, remote tie between Frege and Twardowski thanks to Benno Kerry, whose work was well-known to the Polish philosopher. Jens Cavallin explains that Kerry offered some insights about content regarding objectless presentations before, and that he did so in a polemic with Frege's doctrine (Cavallin, 1997). Kerry criticized Frege for confusing the object and content of presentation, both in his *Foundations of Arithmetic* and *Conceptual Notation and Related Articles* [*Begriffsschrift*], to the point there was an academic feud between them (Frege, 1892; Kerry, 1885, pp. 249–307). But this tie has to be nuanced for at least two reasons. First, it is entirely possible that Twardowski was not aware of Kerry's critique because, as noted by Cavallin (Cavallin, 1997, p. 24, Footnote 29), he primarily referred to the second article by Kerry in Volume X of *Vierteljahrsschrift für wissenschaftliche Philosophie* [Quarterly Journal for Scientific Philosophy and Sociology] (Kerry, 1886, pp. 419–467) whereas the critique appears in volume XI (Kerry, 1887, pp. 249–307). Second, and more importantly for our purposes here, Kerry died in 1889, three years prior to Frege's article on sense and reference. The other link between Twardowski and Frege may come from Edmund Husserl. Indeed, Husserl had been in contact with Frege who reviewed his *Philosophy of Arithmetic* (Husserl, 1891) in 1894 (Frege, 1894), and this contact would shape his approach to psychologism (McIntyre, 1987). But once again, it is a remote connection because there is little relation between Twardowski and Husserl. This tie is even more delicate because I mentioned earlier that Husserl wrote a review of Twardowski's habilitation thesis that contains a critique that one could call Fregean (Husserl, 1896) but it was actually never published during Twardowski's life (Cavallin, 1997; van der Schaar, 2016). Those two links show us that the relationship between Twardowski and Frege is a construction, or more precisely, a reconstruction. This bridge has been crossed by many commentators, but to different extents. Maria van der Schaar, Jerzy Bobryk, Jan Woleński, and Barry Smith all mention Frege without developing a proper comparison; Jens Cavallin discusses both but in relation to Husserl; the French philosopher Jocelyn Benoist goes as far as arguing for an anti-Fregeanism (before his time) in Twardowski (Benoist, 2001, p. 98). Hence, the necessity of further comparing both theories. Finally, both Twardowski and Frege have drawn inspiration from Mill's theory of names, either to build onto it as Twardowski does (Twardowski, 1894, p. 9) or to criticize it as Frege does (Cavallin, 1997, p. 41).

Now, it was noted earlier that there are close relationships between presentation and linguistic expression. In a presentation, objects are presented by the presentation and content is presented in the presentation. The object possesses actual existence (or not), and the content possesses intentional existence. Furthermore, nouns reveal that the speaker is presenting to herself, evoke a certain content in the listener, and designate objects. The link is rendered clearer with the assertion that "it is this content which is the 'meaning' of a noun"



(Twardowski, 1894, p. 9). Hence, for Twardowski, the important semantic pair seems to be designation/meaning [*Bezeichnung/Bedeutung*]. Concerning presentations and meaning, the German logician wrote:

The referent [*Bedeutung*] and sense [*Sinn*] of a sign [*Zeichens*] are to be distinguished from the associated conception [*verknüpfte Vorstellung*]. If the referent of a sign is an object perceivable by the senses, my conception of it is an internal image [*inneres Bild*]. (Frege, 1892, p. 212)

Before drawing the parallels between the two conceptions of meaning, let us delimitate their respective domains of application. I mentioned that Twardowski's theory applies to what he designates nouns [*Namen*], but are really the category of categorematical signs, which are nouns that are not solely co-significant. Frege's theory applies to what he designates proper names [*Eigennamen*]. By this, he means proper names "whose referent is thus a definite object [*bestimmter Gegenstand*] (this word taken in the widest range)" (Frege, 1948, p. 210), but he also intends "the designation of a single object [that] can also consist of several words or other signs". Let us, then, make a simplified version of Frege's theory of meaning. For the German logician, *Bedeutung* is the reference of a name. It is the actual object it refers to. The *Sinn* is the sense expressed by the name; it is what makes it intelligible. For example, the name "Vienna" has a sense and this sense has a city as its reference. By the same account, "the capital of Austria" also has a sense and the references are the same. Names always possess a sense but they can lack reference, because reference is related to existence and there is only actual existence for Frege. "Odysseus" is a name that possesses sense because it is a well-known character of Greek mythology, but it has no reference because it does not refer to an actual person. There is no actual object to which the name corresponds. The same sense may attach to different expressions because there exist different languages (Odysseus is called *Ulysse* in French). For whole sentences, the sense is the thought expressed by the sentence, and the reference is the truth value. That is why, as in the case of proper names, some sentences have sense but no reference: they are intelligible but cannot be true or false (e.g., the present king of France is bald).<sup>17</sup>

This notion of sense is a problem for Twardowski's general theory—i.e., without taking into account objectless presentations—because he needs a solid relationship between the mental level and the grammatical level. It is clearly expressed by Cavallin (1997, p. 115): "there is no adequate description of a presentation only as a psychic event taking place in someone's mind or head, or as the content of this event". But we have to keep in mind that this would be a problem if and only if Twardowski were to make a distinction between sense and reference. Frege aims to construct a theory of signification for logic. All his considerations are linguistic, meaning they belong to the external realm of language. Twardowski is far from forsaking the linguistic domain, but he originally

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<sup>17</sup> I realize this may be questioned. For discussion, see (Evans, 1982).

writes about mental acts. Let us take a moment to develop a comparison of both approaches to see sense in which they are incommensurate. Because he does not introduce a distinction between sense and reference, we have to translate what this notion of sense would be for the Polish philosopher. Unsurprisingly, we have to circle back to the different degree of existence of objects and content, i.e., respectively, actual existence and intentional existence. I mentioned that, according to Twardowski, there are no objectless presentations. If the object of a presentation does not actually exist, a lesser form of existence is provided by the content. So when Frege argues for the necessity of sense, Twardowski argues for the necessity of content. To properly compare both stances, let us come back to Twardowski's lexicon, with special attention paid to the formulation: for Frege there *is* meaning, and for Twardowski content *has* meaning. Here I use meaning in a broader sense, to stay at the same descriptive level as Twardowski; for Frege, we would roughly identify meaning with sense. The previous requirements can be repeated: on the one hand, an object can be inexistant, but there can be some expression that designates it nonetheless, and, on the other hand, an object can be inexistant in actuality, but there can still be some form of existence attached to it through the content we create when we talk about it (or when we present ourselves with it). Even if both conceptions may seem very similar, they do not support the same ideas and they do not have the same underlying hypothesis.

Nevertheless, one can find a moment when the Polish philosopher suggests something that resembles Frege's ideas: when he discusses equivalent (or mutual) presentations [*Wechselvorstellungen*], i.e., presentations that possess the same extension [*Umfang*] but a different content (Twardowski, 1894, §6). In his presentation, he gives an account that is similar to Frege's but he considers it a special case: mutual presentation is when two presentations have the same referent but different senses. For example, "the city located at the site of the Roman Juvavum" and "the birthplace of Mozart" both refer to Salzburg. According to his lexical use, Twardowski writes that they designate, or name, the same thing but have different meanings (Twardowski, 1894, p. 29). We can observe that he does not differentiate between sense and reference but between designation and meaning. But there is a problem here for Twardowski because he holds that, usually, a given content belongs to one specific object only. He suggests a resolution of the problem by stating that equivalent presentations are presentations *in* which there are different contents and *through* which the same object is presented (Twardowski, 1894, p. 29). The difference between both presentations lies with their constitutive parts: as parts, the presentation of Juvavum possesses the idea of the Roman Empire or the presentation of an antique city, etc. And the presentation of the birthplace of Mozart possesses, as parts, the idea of the composer, of music, etc. That is why the presentations do not share the same content although they refer to the same object. It is a pleasing solution for a problem unknown to Twardowski: referential opacity. I can know that I went to Salzburg in 2017 and visited the house in which Mozart was born, and not know that I went to the site of Juvavum, and inversely, depending on the constitutive parts

of the content of my presentation of Salzburg. Presentation is a mental act that can be subdivided into two movements. This is apparent when Twardowski uses the metaphor of painting. When the painter paints, he paints with a brush on canvas, and he paints a landscape. One seemingly discrete action has two parts. Both the painting and the landscape are painted. The adjective “painted” can be either modifying or determining. We can say that “painted” applied to the painting is determining because it determines the constitution of the painting (it is not a drawing, paint was used). On the other hand, “painted” is modifying for the landscape because the painted landscape is not a landscape, it has been made a painting (Twardowski, 1894, p. 16).

I have shown that both theories do indeed have parallels in their content, but they are still significant differences between them. Overall, let us keep in mind two main differences:

**The definition of existence:** Fregean existence is actual existence; he does not concern himself with metaphysical considerations, whereas Twardowskian existence can be either actual or intentional existence. That is why, for both philosophers, a sentence like “Macbeth was cursed” entails different things because Macbeth is a character from a play. For Frege, there is sense in this sentence, but no reference for the name Macbeth—and no truth value for the whole sentence. For Twardowski, truth values are not something of importance, as they can only be mobilized with judgments, and there is a content for the presentation of Macbeth. The presentation of Macbeth as a non-existent object leads to the same kind of content, so the same kind of meaning, as if it was an existent object. The presence of meaning is not dependent on the actual existence of the object. Perhaps an interesting difference between both philosophers’ approaches could be found in a situation where reality is mistaken for fiction: “Lady Diana is the funniest” if I only know her as a character of the series *The Crown* and I talk to someone who only knows the real Lady Diana, or inversely.

**The original aim of each philosopher:** Frege did intend to construct a theory of meaning in order to formalize language with logic. Twardowski did not intend to construct a theory of meaning. As I previously noted, the connection between the two is a reconstruction on our part. Twardowski’s theory emerged parallelly from his study of the relationship between presentations and language. For this reason, the charity one can be tempted to offer either philosopher must be different. Nevertheless, Twardowski’s approach will model that of the Polish School of logic (Woleński, 2009).

## 6. Conclusion

I started this paper with the naive question: our meanings have contents, but do our contents have meanings? The formulation was important because it pre-figured the difficulty we faced all along, that is, the difficulty of describing and

uniting things that are on different levels. The first part of the question relates to philosophy of language, the second part to philosophy of mind. Our original intention was to elaborate on Twardowski's conception of the content of a presentation, to illustrate how it is a pivotal concept in philosophy at the border of mind and language. The Polish philosopher suggests that content possess several functions, and some of them are related to his theory of meaning:

- Content is the content of an act of presentation: a third component of the intentional relation that mediates between the object and the subject;
- Content is that toward which the act is directed—Twardowski removes this function from the object;
- Content conveys the meaning of a noun or a name that is used to designate the object, i.e., what is illicit when a noun is used.

To this I add that content is dynamic because it updates with any new presentation, whereas the object remains the same. From his standpoint, distant from ideal theoretical meaning and closer to the practical use of language, Twardowski highlights a variation of denoting: the expression. Meaning does not stop with a word's evocation but is dynamically embedded in actions and reactions. But there is a defect in the theory, because the term itself could be defined more precisely. The Polish philosopher is not at the same fine descriptive level as Frege, who modeled our current conception of philosophy of language. Hence, Twardowski does not distinguish between sense and reference. But there are similarities between the two approaches, and I have tried to examine some of them. For Twardowski, the important distinction is elsewhere. In the text to which I have restricted ourselves, he wavers between two important pairs: existence and meaning, and designation and meaning.

I conclude here our modest contribution to the analysis of the relationship between Twardowski's conceptions of content and meaning in his habilitation thesis. But we could take it further by integrating later works. In fact, there is a seemingly harmless footnote in *Actions and Products* (Twardowski, 1912, p. 114) that invites further research, in which he specifies that in this later text, he redesigns what he had stated in *On the Content and Object* about content:

In my book *On the Content and Object of Presentations*, I referred to the function of representing as an "act", and to the product of the representing as the "content" of the representation [*Vorstellungsakt, Vorstellungsinhalt*]. [...] Thus, what I referred to as the content of a representation in the above cited work corresponds most accurately to what here appears as the product of the [act of] representing (grammarians sometimes refer to the direct object of the internal complement that corresponds to the product as the direct object of the content). (Twardowski, 1912, p. 114)<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The translator adds a note where he explains that he chose to render *Vorstellung* as "representation" (Twardowski, 1999, p. 114). Note that this is a footnote in the English

This is critical because *Actions and Products* offers numerous insights about semantics and meaning—and the text is still studied on this matter today (Richard, 2022). But, as far as I know, there is no work that develops at length the continuity between early and late Twardowski despite precious insights by many commentators (Bobryk, 1989; Miskiewicz, 2017a, 2017b; van der Schaar, 2006; 2016; 2022).

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text that is also present in the Polish version (Twardowski, 1965, p. 228), but it is integrated into §18 in the German version (Twardowski, 2017, p. 173).

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