

# *Franz Brentano and Cornelio Fabro: A Forgotten Chapter of the Brentanian Reception*

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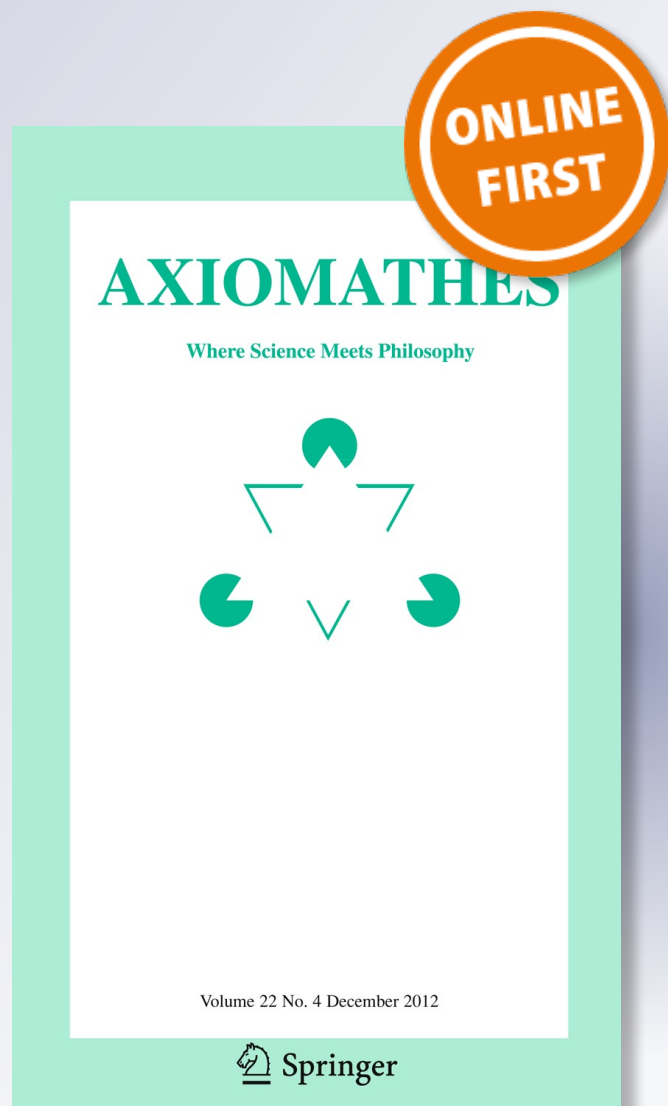
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## Franz Brentano and Cornelio Fabro: A Forgotten Chapter of the Brentanian Reception

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**Abstract** In celebration of the centenary of the Italian philosopher Cornelio Fabro's birth (1911–1995), this paper investigates the essential theoretical traits that undergird the framework of Fabro's 1941 texts, by comparing them with Franz Brentano's (1838–1817) project of renewing Thomism through a new understanding of Aristotle. The secondary literature concerning the comparison of both these authors is almost nonexistent. Our goal is to clarify some of the central issues regarding the relation between Fabro and Brentano through direct textual analysis of unpublished letters exchanged between Fabro and Agostino Gemelli about Brentano and his pupil Carl Stumpf.

**Keywords** German philosophy · Franz Brentano · Cornelio Fabro · Agostino Gemelli · Italian philosophy · Gestaltism · Carl Stumpf

For the centenary of the birth of the Italian philosopher, Cornelio Fabro,<sup>1</sup> there is no shortage of miscellanea, essays, and commemorations that focus on one or another aspect of Fabro's research. Our task here is to investigate and clarify the essential

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<sup>1</sup> As a Visiting Professor, he taught at Notre Dame University (USA) in 1965. He was the official representative of Italy at the international convention of UNESCO for the revision of the "Declaration of the Rights of Man" (Oxford 1965). From 1968 to 1981 he held the position of Professor of Theoretical Philosophy at the University of Perugia. In 1974 he received the "Aquinas Memorial Medal" of the American Catholic Philosophical Association (Washington); he was also designated the official orator of the ministerial committee for the commemoration of St. Thomas Aquinas in Rome, in the presence of the President of the Republic of Italy. Fabro was a founding member of the University of St. Thomas

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theoretical aspects that undergird much of Fabro's work in 1941, which analyses the relation between perception and thought, by comparing them with the renewal project in Thomism headed by Franz Brentano (1838–1917) through a new interpretation of Aristotle.

An analysis of secondary literature on these two writers shows that there is no praiseworthy summary of the topic that we can recall. This comparison, however, should not alarm us since Fabro himself, in 1950, in a still unpublished curriculum vitae, speaks of the theoretical orientation of the first 20 years of his academic formation and explicitly says that he was “almost exclusively” committed to the systematic treatment of “two arguments”: (i) the structure of entities, and (ii) the structure of consciousness.

The first theme belongs to the volume entitled *The Metaphysical Notion of Participation according to St. Thomas Aquinas* (1939), which sought to bring the thought of Thomas back to his own sources, to highlight the originality and fecundity of his Platonic and Aristotelian synthesis. Speaking rather of the second theme means individuating the “manifestation of the modern theory of consciousness”, and the most important principle that, according to Fabro, “brought it to dissolution” and, then, to show how the Aristotelian demand about “knowing any form always presents itself with a structure corresponding to the noetic sphere of the represented object” remains valid. And regarding this second aspect, for Fabro, there was nothing substantial other than the task, method, and result which Brentano “entrusted to his teaching in the second half of the nineteenth century.”<sup>2</sup> But to illustrate some passages of this comparison, we must directly analyze the texts and examine their central points.

## 1 Cornelio Fabro as an Interpreter of Brentano

To adequately understand Fabro's interest in Franz Brentano and his thought, we should identify the beginning (or beginnings) of his intellectual journey, which will then effectively give significance to the rest of the trajectory of his research; it is necessary, then, to retrace our steps by recalling Fabro's research, which was conducted in the early years of his academic career. In particular, in 1931 he graduated in philosophy, with a thesis entitled *The Objectivity of the Principle of Causality: A Critique of David Hume*, the author who traced “the first form of associationism”; and the Gestaltism—an expression used by some of the best pupils of Brentano, like Ehrenfels, Stumpf, Meinong—emerged directly, and at times in a harsh way, as a reaction against the associationism, allowing the revival

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Footnote 1 continued

(Houston, Texas); moreover he was also the founder of the “Italian Center for Kierkegaardian Studies” (Potenza 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Fabro (1941a), 39. The two texts of 1941 were reviewed by A. Rossi (1943), 413–416 and 416–419, who concludes that: “... the two studies are valuable especially for their breadth of research; a breadth that rivals its depth of analysis, with secure and complete summaries, with the richness and profundity of its arguments ... No philosophical scholar should ignore these two volumes” (ibid., p. 416).

and reconstruction of a gnoseological realism faithful to Aristotle.<sup>3</sup> Then, in 1934, he received an award at the *Pontificia Accademia Romana di San Tommaso d'Aquino* for his dissertation entitled *The Principle of Causality: Psychological Origins, Philosophical Formulations, and its Necessary and Universal Value*; in 1937 he published an essay entitled 'The Psychological Origin of the Notion of Causality' in the *Rivista di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica*<sup>4</sup> and, in the same year, he published a long review of *Life and Psyche* by Francesco De Sarlo.<sup>5</sup> Finally, during the two academic years of 1938–1940, the young Fabro taught biology and theoretical psychology at the *Corso di Perfezionamento* in the philosophy department of the *Pontificia Università Lateranense*; and, during the same period, publishes various articles on 'The Problem of Sensory Perception',<sup>6</sup> on 'Idealism and Realism in Sensory Perception',<sup>7</sup> and 'Knowledge and Perception in Aristotelian-Thomistic Psychology'.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, during Christmas 1939, he spent some time studying at the *Istituto di Psicologia dell'Università Cattolica* in Milan, where he carried out the proposal of "a theoretical reconstruction, on the basis of a new phenomenology, of the result and the principles of the Gestalt Psychology in a definitive summary".<sup>9</sup>

In this summary, entitled *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Fabro takes the opportunity to elaborate on and integrate the material gathered for his courses (1938–1940) and critically present "the results, principles, and teaching of the 'Gestalt'", in order to highlight its value and limits regarding the problem of knowledge.<sup>10</sup> And in this way, with his teaching, but also in his reaction against English phenomenism, it was Brentano who ignited the debate which then developed around the problem of "form" (Gestalt).

For all of these reasons, then, Fabro paid "particular attention"<sup>11</sup> to Brentano, because he had a clear understanding of the "insufficiency of empiricism, at the level of psychical observation",<sup>12</sup> and then, he had traced "the basic aims" of a "recovery of the problem of knowledge, beyond that of Kant".<sup>13</sup> He analyzes the principal text of Brentano on psychology and rightly recognizes that in it "the central notion ... is that of intentionality,"<sup>14</sup> emphasizing the Aristotelian and medieval sources and later developments. This perspective rejects modern gnoseologies, which starting from Descartes onward had wanted to liquidate the

<sup>3</sup> Fabro (1941a), 47.

<sup>4</sup> XXIX, 2–3, 1937, 207–245.

<sup>5</sup> Fabro (1937), 65–77 (review of F. De Sarlo, *Vita e Psyche. Saggio di filosofia della Biologia*, Firenze 1935).

<sup>6</sup> Fabro (1938a), 5–63.

<sup>7</sup> Fabro (1939), 117–135.

<sup>8</sup> Fabro (1938b), 337–368.

<sup>9</sup> Fabro (1941a), xxviii.

<sup>10</sup> Gemelli, *Prefazione*, in Fabro (1941a), ix.

<sup>11</sup> Fabro (1941a), 151.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 150–151.

<sup>13</sup> Fabro (1941a), 38.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 151.

way traced by Aristotle and St. Thomas and had given life to a schism between perception and thought. The problem lies the principle of association, by which “the contents of perception are given to the consciousness immediately,”<sup>15</sup> and then to the “famous principle of ‘autonomy’, the point of departure for modern philosophy and foundation of theories about consciousness that make recourse to Hume and Kant and lead to the principle of ‘creativity and absolute spontaneity of Thought’ (Idealism)”.<sup>16</sup>

For Fabro, the initial moment of Brentano’s work had expressed a judgment of dissent with respect to the primary associationistic assumptions, and at the same time had proposed a return to a conception which was believed by Associationism to be weakened and obsolete. To this end, Franz Brentano, and his entire school of thought, would achieve “an authentic revolution”,<sup>17</sup> which had “taken a storehouse of arguments in every area against the principle of association”, so that “the significance and tasks taken from philosophies and psychologies that refer to the Cartesian dualism, has been abandoned forever”.<sup>18</sup> The research of Brentano’s school of thought had laid the groundwork for a return to Aristotle, which understood “the profound beauty of Aristotelian gnoseology”<sup>19</sup> and provided a way to return to a position that was “venerated and ancient, which Descartes had wanted to abandon and which now, with the death of such aspiration, comes forward to vindicate his own rights”.<sup>20</sup>

Reassuming the terms of the argument, we can affirm that, for Fabro, Brentano’s project is taken as a constant and diligent basis for comparison, which resolves itself on speculative grounds in a common defence of Aristotelian-Thomistic gnoseological realism. That does not prevent, however, some points of clear disagreement between the two authors. Brentano “had accepted, on one hand, with excessive trust, the primacy of empirical analysis, and had stopped with a too historically determined Aristotelianism, without taking into account the developments of the later Arab-Latin tradition, and he was not able to hold back the current of new problems which came to dominate”; on the other hand, if we look at his earliest pupils, like Meinong, Marty, and Husserl among the most important, the same reasons led them into open forms of rationalism. And so the problems that were presented with admirable sagacity by Brentano need to be resolved. I will modestly attempt “to correct these inadequacies which Brentano’s method manifested in the speculative part, beginning with the phenomenological analysis of which he had been the master”.<sup>21</sup>

The inadequacies that Fabro intends to address in his work also constituted the points of disagreement with Brentano and his school of thought, which, as I have already mentioned can be framed in two ways:

<sup>15</sup> Fabro (1941b), xiv.

<sup>16</sup> Fabro (1941b), xv.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., v.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 421.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., xiv-xv.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 39.

1. An “excessive trust” in the “primacy of empirical analysis”;
2. And “an Aristotelianism that is too historically determined”.

These shortcomings, according to Fabro, not only *seem* not to allow Brentano to fulfil the task of reaching an equilibrium that resolves the internal tensions of his thought, but, rather, they *appear* to invalidate them and every attempt to forestall the emergence of new problems; and then, they seem to ensure that he ultimately, and even more so than his disciples, endorses forms of rationalism. Particularly, in characterising “the psychological phenomena actually present”, Brentano hold that they are the “only facts immediately evident”, and in this way, for Fabro, it *seems* that Brentano “in the end, makes notable concessions to the phenomenism that he wants to criticize, especially with the affirmation that gnoseological immediacy is privileged in an exclusive way with regard to the psychological act as such”.<sup>22</sup>

## 2 Fabro and Brentano’s School of Thought: Carl Stumpf

Among the disciples of Brentano, only Carl Stumpf, in his later, more mature texts that “constitute one of the most important contributions toward the defence of gnoseological realism against any form of phenomenism and idealism,” especially his posthumous work *Erkenntnislehre* (1939–1940), was more inclined to move to a “more faithful adherence to Aristotelianism”.<sup>23</sup> In fact, for Fabro, Carl Stumpf re-appropriates the famous Aristotelian theory of common sensibles as well as the theory of the “synthetic function of consciousness (‘common sense’)”. In so doing, “he arrives at a purely psychological theory that has many more advantages—even today—than any other proposed by modern thought”, “preserves the original character of the primitive structures and recognises the contribution of experience”.<sup>24</sup> It is no coincidence that this perspective advanced by Stumpf would constitute the basis for, and give life to, Fabro’s conceptual framework in the second volume of *Perception and Thought*, which is the “construction of a gnoseological realism of experience with a functionalistic background.”<sup>25</sup> For that, according to Fabro, Stumpf always had “decisively contributed the solution to the phenomenological problem”<sup>26</sup> and had also invested his criticism, and with good reason, against “the idealistic deviations of Husserl’s phenomenology”.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 434.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 36. For more on the person and work of Carl Stumpf, and his relation to Franz Brentano, see *Brentano Studien*, X, 2002–2003, see also the monograph on the theme: *Essays über Carl Stumpf und Franz Brentano*, ed. W. Baumgartner and A. Reimherr; also see, the biography of Stumpf, ed. H. Sprung (unter Mitarbeit von L. Sprung), *Carl Stumpf—Eine Biographie. Von der Philosophie zur experimentellen Psychologie*, (München/Wien: Profil Verlag, 2006).

### 3 Unpublished Letters from Cornelio Fabro to Agostino Gemelli Regarding Stumpf

In an unpublished letter, dated 19 May 1939, addressed to Agostino Gemelli, Fabro quotes in no uncertain terms:

“Most reverend Father,

I have received Stumpf’s book and I am very grateful for your exquisite favour. I have already started reading it as it is clear and interesting; regarding its content, judging from my first impression, the problem of perception seems very interesting to me in particular. Among all of Brentano’s disciples, it seems to me that Stumpf has remained the most faithful to Aristotelianism, and in this book he openly corrects the Idealist and Spinozistic directions of his teacher in his final years. When I have finished taking into account and to evaluate the general content of his work, I will happily send you a review also because Stumpf places the psychological problem of perception at the center of the controversial gnoseological discussions developed from Locke onwards and has strong words against Kantianism and Idealism”.<sup>28</sup>

For all these reasons, according to Fabro, the role and the work of Stumpf is to be stressed. This task is carried out in *Perception and Thought*, which, not incidentally, is intended as a continuation and completion of the research previously conducted in *The Phenomenology of Perception*.<sup>29</sup> In particular, in *Perception and Thought*, Fabro intends to show “the exceptional importance”<sup>30</sup> of the conclusions reached by Stumpf, who constitutes “the most suggestive approach to new problems with Aristotelianism”.<sup>31</sup> Fabro reads Stumpf in opposition to the school of Graz and against Meinong. In particular, Fabro appreciates Stumpf’s theory of the “immediate unification of sensory data ... made possible by way of the *unity of consciousness*: this Aristotelian teaching, honoured by Lotze and Brentano. And the so-called, ‘quality of form’ is none other than the teaching of Aristotle”.<sup>32</sup>

These reasons lead Fabro to claim in no uncertain terms: “It is substantially this solution that I intend to take up and integrate in this work”.<sup>33</sup> For Fabro, Stumpf moves, in his psychological analysis, from the distinction between *Erscheinungen* (or phenomenal presentations, immediate content) and *psychische Funktionen* (psychical functions, or acts that unveil complex, unified sensory content). In the cognitive process, the intimate and reciprocal interaction between phenomenal presentations and the psychical functions conditions every apprehension of the real. In fact, there are no presentations as real content without reference to the functions

<sup>28</sup> Historical Archive Università Cattolica, Milan, (prot.82/127/1170). The book Fabro refers to here is the first of two posthumous volumes by C. Stumpf, *Erkenntnislehre*, as is evinced in other letters sent to the same Gemelli in addition to the review Fabro published in *Rivista di Filosofia Neoscholastica*, 1939, XVII, 431–435.

<sup>29</sup> Fabro, *Prefazione*, in Fabro (1941a), vii.

<sup>30</sup> Fabro (1941b), 87.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 89.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.



and vice versa.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the quality of these facts in general present themselves “always together with other qualities that integrate them and for this reason are called *attributes* of sensations”. In this, then, it appears clearly that the sensations manifest themselves, not as isolated, but usually as complex sensations, or better, as materials, upon which, then, the process of abstraction is exercised.

To comprehend the full impact of this discourse, according to Fabro, one must bear in mind that Stumpf describes perception as “apprehending something” and distinguishes between outer and inner perception: the former has to do with external stimuli or sensible presentations; but the latter refers to the psychological functions. Hence he distinguishes between “*perception of absolute content and perception of relations*”, because

it is the apprehension of a relation between the parts of a whole or multiple relations in a complex that which rightly constitutes the perception of its distinct stage of consciousness ... This complex of relations of sensible material is what constitutes the Gestalt ... The apprehension of a Gestalt is therefore on the basis of sensible presentations, inner and outer, which form the substrate of all the psychical machine; as the Gestalt arises, in turn, the substrate for the processes of thought is given.<sup>35</sup>

Consequently, the apprehension of a *Gestalt* is immediate: it is not *Nachwahrnehmung*, as Associationism would have it, but rather *Mitwahrnehmung*, a “perception-with ... the ‘*Gestalten*’ are perceived *with* and *in* (*in und mit*) *absolute content*”<sup>36</sup> and thus their perception necessarily implies reference to what is outside, to the objects toward which they refer and in which they are grounded.

This perception in and with “is a perception of relations on the basis of a single or repeated presentation of relative sensible content”<sup>37</sup>; and consequently, the Gestalt has “*a membered complex*”, because it comes “apprehended as a unity, as a whole, in which however there are members, parts to distinguish, just as for every relation in respect to its foundation”.<sup>38</sup> There are various categories of *Gestalten*, among which in particular are founded ones (natural and given in the sensible complex), which precede the others and ensure that consciousness can perform analysis and synthesis, and not founded ones (due to the intervention of subjective aspects). Another division is made between spatial, but also acoustical, *Gestalten* further subdivided into *simultaneous* and *successive*; the latter, in turn, are either *continuous* or *discrete*. The problem of the perception of content re-emerges here. In fact, Stumpf considers the extension as an irreducible attribute of the content of sensation and of complexes of sensation. Moreover, another difficulty arises, namely that for Stumpf, the continuous is infinitely divisible, but

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 90.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid 92.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid 93.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 94.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 95.

we perceive only the continuous in relation to the limits that are perceived. But why do we perceive the real and not also the possible? ... According to Stumpf, sensible presentations are made so that in their nature there is no need for an end to the process of division into points, even if the quality of our sensible organs ... is limited in reality. The perception of continuity is, in this way, a consciousness that we have through a certain determinate content of perception, but it is not itself a content of perception.<sup>39</sup>

This discussion leads Stumpf to admit that there exists the “possibility of an indefinite division of the continuous and consequently differences of non-perceived sensation ... also there are also ‘non-perceived sensations’”.<sup>40</sup> It is in the introduction of this further aspect that he brings about a return to Aristotelian positions. In other words, there are relations

which can in single cases remain non-perceived ... they manifest themselves in the sensible complex, in a purely physical way ... they remain in some way ‘coexisting’ with those grasped in consciousness: this ‘concomitant consciousness’ is identified by Stumpf with the common sensibles of Aristotle.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, Stumpf pronounces the failure of Associationism and rationalist attempts at explanation and further develops the theory of perception, considering.

the *immanent* relations of perceptual content. The *Empfindungskomplex* contains the relations, whether these come to be perceived or non-perceived if they are adverted the *Empfindungskomplex* becomes for consciousness a *Verhältnissanz*, that is, a Gestalt. The perception reaches then its complete development in two stages: a) distinguishing perceptual relations; and b) reuniting them ‘synoptically’ in a unity (*Zusammenfassung*), making possible the unitary intuition of the Gestalt (*Zusammenschauen*) ... the two stages ... can also be described as *selection* and *organization*<sup>42</sup>

and form the structure brought about through the process of perception.

For Fabro, this is the major contribution of Stumpf’s theory. However, despite its merits, it presents several difficulties. Reassuming the terms of the discourse, we can claim the following:

- Stumpf rightly criticized Associationism and re-appropriated the Aristotelian theory of common sensible, claiming, with his theory of *Erscheinungen*, that sensible qualities shows some structure;
- Stumpf’s theory of *Funktionen* recognizes the character in an early stage of development of this structure and the necessity of its further development for the problem of consciousness;
- This development, that is the organization of phenomena, becomes more complex through the relationship with physical-physiological conditions, which

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 97–98.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 99.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 100.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 103.

means that there is a transition from the indistinct to the distinct that is a “*differentiation*” of distinct content, but also an “*integration*” of the same in the characteristics which makes possible the differentiation from the primary nucleus and their phenomenal subsistence”.

- These two moments occur simultaneously, and this means that there is a necessary reciprocity in the acquisition of one and the other: what happens in one, occurs in the other and vice versa.<sup>43</sup>

This process of differentiation-integration of formal or common sensibles content, according to Fabro, *ex parte objecti*, gives rise to three problems, because it pulls in three directions:

1. “*downward*, in respect to proper sensible in general;
2. *In its own sphere*, in respect to the other common sensibles for each of them in particular;

*Upward*, in respect to the superior functions of thought, of which common sensibles, unlike the proper sensible, constitute, in a developed consciousness, an area of objects that can reach the highest noetic elaboration (mathematical science and artistic activity, technique).<sup>44</sup>

According to Fabro, Stumpf had analyzed only the first two aspects, completely ignoring the third. In particular, writes Fabro, Neo-scholasticism operated on this level, whose merit was that “of having a third person point of view (Michotte, Gemelli,<sup>45</sup> Moore)”, which “from this moment will form the object independent of the enquiry, given the decisive importance that it has, at least for us, for overcoming idealism and, first, its roots, the Kantian critique”.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 148–149.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 149.

<sup>45</sup> Agostino Gemelli, was the founder of the Università Cattolica of Mila (Italy). The Psychology and Biology Laboratory that he established in 1924 was his main creation and featured exceptional research instruments for the time. The Laboratory became the Institute of Psychology in 1958 and then the Department of Psychology in 1983.

<sup>46</sup> Fabro (1941b), 149–50.