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GUSTAV FECHNER AND WILLIAM JAMES: A REASSESSMENT

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ABSTRACT

In his famous book, *The Principles of Psychology,* William James reviewed the experimental literature of his time. This review included the work of Gustav Fechner. In the book and in several letters, James made it clear that he did not think highly of Fechner's contributions. Over time, however, his attitude changed, and James eventually became an enthusiastic supporter of Fechner's ideas as he became better acquainted them. Also discussed are a number of similarities between the two men.

In psychology's history Gustav Fechner is typically recognized almost exclusively for his impressive list of scientific achievements. While it is true that our textbooks often mention that Fechner was somewhat inclined toward mysticism, this acknowledgment is clearly overshadowed by an emphasis on his scientific persona. We have now come to appreciate that this state of affairs represents an inverted priority because, even though his scientific work was of great significance, it clearly was also well integrated with, and subsumed by, his concern with larger philosophical and spiritual matters.

If it has been our failure to recognize the more encompassing dimensions of Fechner's life and personal philosophy, then it appears that we are in good company, for the same error was made by no less a figure than the American psychologist and philosopher, William James. To his credit, James's regard for Fechner did change radically in some significant ways, but more importantly, Fechner's impact on James provides yet another example of the influence he exerted on psychology. One of the purposes of this paper is to provide a brief chronicle of James's evolving assessment of Fechner as it appears in James's own writing. In

addition, I will review some of the interesting similarities between the two men and suggest how these may have contributed to James's later receptiveness to Fechner's ideas.

Gustav Theodor Fechner was born on April 19, 1801, and died 86 years later on November 18, 1887, in Leipzig, where he spent the latter 70 years of his life. William James, on the other hand, was born on January 11, 1842, and died in Chocorua, New Hampshire, on August 26, 1910. The lives of the two men thus overlapped by nearly 46 years. Fechner was well known when James was a young man, and James may have read some of Fechner's writings by 1870—a full seventeen years before the latter's death (Allen, 1967). However, in spite of James's numerous trips to Europe and his interaction with a wide variety of European intellectuals, it appears that the two men never met, possibly because it wasn't until several years after Fechner's death that James began to read his philosophical works in earnest (Marshall, 1974). Before this period in James's life, however, his regard for Fechner's ideas was considerably less than enthusiastic, as revealed in an exchange of letters between James and G. Stanley Hall (1884-1924). At the time, Hall was in Germany serving as a student in Wundt's laboratory (Bringmann, Bringmann, & Medway, 1987). After a discussion with Fechner on American spiritualism, Hall wrote James the following account in a letter dated December 27, 1879 (Perry, 1935):

> Fechner is a curiosity . . . . and is altogether a bundle of oddities in person and manners. He has forgotten all the details of his *Psychophysik;* and is chiefly interested in theorizing how knots can be tied in endless strings, and how words can be written on the inner side of two slates sealed together. [He] . . . wants me to go to Zollner and talk to him about American spiritualism, but I have not been. Fechner is tedious enough, and I hear Zollner is more so. (Vol. 2, p. 18)

James's reply to Hall in a letter dated January 16, 1880, was: «Your description of Fechner is entertaining enough. You know I always thought his psycho-physic as moonshiny as any of his other writings, fundamentally valuable only for its rich details» (p. 19).

This sentiment is another example of James's well-reported ambivalence toward the experimentalist contributions to psychology; he supported and recognized the value of experimentation, but found laboratory work personally distasteful. Nevertheless, when he wrote his classic book, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), James faithfully reviewed the significant experimental literature of the time, and this included

Fechner's research. A rough count reveals that Fechner's name appears on no less than 17 pages of *The Principles*. The following material drawn from that work provides an elaborated view of James's attitude toward the German experimentalists in general, and Fechner's work in particular. James thus wrote of Fechner:

> Fechner's book *[Psychophysics]* was the starting point of a new department of literature, which it would be perhaps impossible to match for the qualities of thoroughness and subtlety, but of which, in the humble opinion of the present writer, the proper psychological outcome is just *nothing*. (p. 534)

James then dutifully reported on the research and methodology of psychophysics and concluded with a highly critical assessment:

> But it would be terrible if even such a dear old man as this could saddle our science forever with his patient whimsies, and, in a world so full of more nutritious objects of attention, compel all future students to plough through the difficulties, not only of his own works, but of the still drier ones written in his refutation. Those who desire this dreadful literature can find it; it has a 'disciplinary value;' but I will not even enumerate it in a footnote. (p. 549)

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN JAMES AND FECHNER

James's rather harsh commentary of Fechner's work is intriguing because a comparison of the two men reveals a number of interesting similarities which could easily lead one to predict a greater harmony of views than James's initial reaction suggests. However, James did, in fact, later change his evaluation of Fechner's work as he grew older, and more importantly, as he became more familiar with Fechner's philosophy and spiritual concepts. A look at some of the similarities between Fechner and James can be helpful in tracing James's transition from skeptic to supporter.

Looking at the individual backgrounds of Fechner and James, one notes that religion (conceived broadly) was a prominent feature in the lives of each man. Fechner was born into a family of clergymen on both his father's and mother's sides. The family was both intellectual and liberal, and although Fechner's father died when Gustav was only five years old, the continuing influence of a religious environment was felt through his family. Despite the fact that Fechner went through a period

of atheism, religious influence was strong throughout his life and his later works could appropriately be described as religious in character.

William James, on the other hand, could not be said to have been reared in a family which subscribed to any orthodoxy. Biographical accounts (e.g. Allen, 1967; Feinstein, 1984; Matthiessen, 1974) amply document the liberal and free-spirited intellectual give-and-take that abounded in the James family. However, the family was influenced by a religious heritage of sorts that can easily be traced to William's grandfather. William's father, Henry James Sr., experienced a terrifying mystical vision in May of 1844 which haunted him for two years until he found refuge in the writings of the Swedish mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) (Allen, 1967). While it is true that William's father did not hold to the dogma and ritual associated with any organized religious institution—including Swedenborgianism—spiritual matters were treated seriously in the James' household. It is of interest that Fechner also read Swedenborg and quoted him in his own writing (e.g. *Zend-Avesta)* (Bringmann, Bringmann, & Medway, 1987).

Neither James nor Fechner took a dogmatic approach to the subject or religion, nor did they support beliefs that were incompatible with reason. Rather, each man acknowledged the reality of nonrational and indeterminate factors in human experience, and attempted to provide a place for these in his philosophy.

Other similarities between Fechner and James include the fact that both studied medicine, but neither ever practiced it; both men were excellent writers; and both «grew into» psychology from other disciplines (Barzun, 1983). Both men were plagued with health problems throughout life, including eye trouble—which was particularly acute for Fechner. Both men experienced a serious life crises with spiritual overtones, which for James closely resembled his father's frightening vision of 1844 (Feinstein, 1984), and which for Fechner resulted in a crisis period of three years duration (Balance & Bringmann, 1987; Hall, 1912). Both men were passionately committed to the world of ideas, but each insisted on an ultimate grounding of their concepts in the empirical whenever possible. Accordingly, both men created their systems from the «bottom up» rather than from pre-determined «top down» dogma. In addition, both men felt that expanded awareness of this world provided enough evidence of its inherent spiritual qualities that it wasn't necessary to posit a separate, transcendental realm apart from the natural universe (Hall, 1912; Karier, 1986).

Still another point of similarity between Fechner and James was

their mutual interest in spiritualism. Both men attended seances, both argued that spiritualism should not be rejected a priori, and both were cautious about accepting the results of inquiries into the paranormal. James, for example, was active in the Society for Psychical Research, but he acknowledged that progress was not very evident in this field even after many years of research (Murphy & Ballou, 1960). Fechner participated in a series of seances with the American medium Henry Slade (1840-1904), and cautiously accepted the phenomenon as genuine (Bringmann, Bringmann, & Medway, 1987; Medway, 1987). However, Fechner also insisted that contact with the supernatural was not necessary or even desirable for the construction of a healthy religious faith (Fechner, 1977; Lowrie, 1946). Despite their guarded endorsements, it is clear that neither man was swept up in spiritualism to the point of unreason. Rather, it was regarded as an interesting phenomena which could potentially bear on their philosophies, and was therefore considered worthy of investigation.

JAMES'S LATER ASSESSMENT OF FECHNER

With such similar temperamental and philosophical outlooks, one may wonder why James did not more readily subscribe to Fechner's thinking from the outset. It seems likely that he was offended by the implications of psychophysics. If one examines James's writings on pluralism, pragmatism, and theism, there emerges the picture of a man who would naturally resist any system of thought that would constrain his sense of freedom or challenge his individuality. To James, human consciousness was an organic whole that was fundamentally irreducible. Because psychophysics employed a reductionist methodology which sought to analyze consciousness by breaking it into components, James would naturally perceive it as a threat to his belief in the integrity of consciousness and the sense of personal identity.

Perry (1935) has described James's regard for Fechner as if there were «two Fechners»: the Fechner of the psychophysics, and later, the metaphysical Fechner. It was this latter image of Fechner that James focused on during the decade of the 1890's. As James grew older he apparently started thinking more about death and immortality, subjects which Fechner had discussed in detail. In addition, as Marshall has written (1974), James finally came to terms with the idea that consciousness could be composed of subordinate elements. Ironically, Fechner's view of compounding was actually quite compatible with James's

own position. Fechner considered the compounding of elements to result in a system with emergent properties that resulted from the dynamic interaction of the parts; consequently Fechner was not arguing that consciousness was merely the simple additive process to which James had objected. At any rate, James became intrigued by Fechner's imaginative vision of the universe, and his change in attitude toward Fechner's ideas is well illustrated in some of his correspondence from 1905 to 1909 (Perry, 1935).

To F .C. S. Schiller James wrote the following in 1905:

I've just been reading Fechner's *Tagesansicht,* and his *Seelenfrage.* I can't yet get over the dialectic difficulty of seeing how a wide-span consciousness can be entitatively *constituted* of smaller consciousnesses, but the dear old man's thoroughness and intimacy with his theory, and the inimitable use he makes of the methods of induction and analogy makes all these absolutists with their short-cuts to beatitude shrivel...to pellicles. (p. 588)

To Charles Strong, James wrote a letter on April 9, 1907 (James, 1920) in which he mentioned Fechner's analogies and, in discussing superhuman consciousness, stated that we may hold a position in the universe comparable to our cats and dogs in our libraries—co-existing and participating in the same world, yet oblivious to the knowledge and fuller meaning that could be found there.

To Theodore Flournoy, James wrote the following on January 2, 1908: «I have just read the first half of Fechner's «Zend-Avesta,» a wonderful book, by a wonderful genius. He had his vision and he knows how to discuss it, as no one's vision ever was discussed» (p. 300).

In a letter to Henri Bergson, James recommended Fechner's *Zend-Avesta* and described Fechner as «of the real race of prophets» (James, 1920, p. 309). In addition, James discussed Fechner at length in *A Pluralistic Universe* (James, 1958). These represent but a few of the examples that could be cited.

CONCLUSION

We have seen the transformation of William James's attitude toward Fechner from one of near scorn to that of enthusiastic support. James's own developing views found an ally in Fechner. Together they offered an alternative to a materialistic zeitgeist which threatened to overwhelm

cherished beliefs and values. Perhaps one of the most important contributions made by both Fechner and James is that their views can be understood as powerful arguments for an expansion of contemporary psychology's paradigms so that the discipline can more readily fit into the larger fabric of human experience.

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