CARL STUMPF’S DEBT TO HERMANN LOTZE

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Abstract. Our objective is to present Carl Stumpf as an autonomous philosopher and psychologist, not simply as another member of the school of Franz Brentano. To this purpose, we explore the relatedness of Stumpf to the supervisor of his two dissertations, Hermann Lotze. Lotze communicated two main ideas to Stumpf: (i) the importance of experimental scientific investigations for philosophy; (ii) the independence of the content of human knowledge, both of experience and of judgment, from the knowing subject.

1 ‘Stumpf, who will save you from Brentano?’

Carl Stumpf (1848–1937) is a key figure in the fin de siècle germanophone philosophy. Unfortunately, after World War I, interest in Stumpf as a philosopher waned. One of the reasons was that already in the 1920s the attention of mainstream philosophers shifted to the rising rivalry between analytic and continental philosophy. The authors of Stumpf’s Festschrift of 1923 were mainly psychologists from the Berlin Institute of Psychology, founded by Stumpf himself in 1906.

The interest in Carl Stumpf’s philosophy was revived only in the last twenty years. In this respect the Neo-Brentanists rendered a great service.1 But while association of Carl Stumpf to Franz Brentano fostered the former’s studies, it also gave rise to one-sided interpretations of Stumpf as a philosopher. In this regard his importance and idiosyncrasy as a philosopher has remained overlooked. In this connection it should be noted that before World War II, Carl Stumpf was considered an autonomous philosophically-oriented psychologist in his own right, not simply another member of Franz Brentano’s school. (Moog 1922, 157–61; Lehmann 1943, 107–13)

1 The Carl Stumpf Society was founded only in 2010. See. http://www.carl-stumpf.de/
One of the objectives of this paper is to free Stumpf from Brentano: to try to see him as an autonomous philosopher. There is no better means for achieving this aim than to study the relation between Carl Stumpf and his PhD and Habilitation Thesis supervisor Herman Lotze – Stumpf received his PhD in 1868, and his Habilitation in 1870 – at the University of Göttingen. Between 1870 and 1873 Stumpf was also an Adjunct Professor (Privatdozent) at the University of Göttingen where Lotze was a distinguished Professor. Soon Lotze became his ‘devoted fatherly adviser’ (1917, 5). The professor and his student were so close that in 1869 Lotze seriously contemplated the possibility of visiting Stumpf in Würzburg or Aschaffenburg during the summer vacation. (Lotze 2003, 541) It is therefore no small wonder that Stumpf’s first book Über den psychologischen Ursprung der Raumvorstellung (1873), which was praised by figures such as William James and Bertrand Russell, was dedicated to Lotze.

But it was not only Lotze that helped Stumpf in distancing himself from Franz Brentano, his teacher and source of inspiration. In his Selbstdarstellung Stumpf also remembered that his real interest in the sciences first developed in Göttingen where he also studied physics under Friedrich Kohlrausch and Wilhelm Weber. Along with the mathematician Felix Klein, Stumpf founded the ‘Eskimo Society’, a group of young scientists that read papers in different academic disciplines – Stumpf presented the position of philosophy. (1924, 8) In these years Stumpf also became acquainted with Leipzig psychophysicists Fechner and E. H. Weber.

Of course, Stumpf was explicit about the fact that Franz Brentano had played a central role in his philosophical development. Later Stumpf remembered:

My whole understanding of philosophy, the correct and mistaken methods of philosophizing, the basic and essential doctrines of logic and epistemology, psychology, ethics and metaphysics, which I still maintain today, are his doctrines. (1919, 144)

But he also noted that ‘[Lotze’s] way of thinking had influenced my thinking more than Brentano wanted it to be the case, despite the fact that the outline of my epistemology remained that of Brentano’s. (Stumpf 1924, 4–5) Finally, was also cautious enough to note that ‘in general, such questions of property can be better judged by third par-