BOLZANO'S LEGACY

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Bernard Bolzano (1781-1848), to whom this volume is dedicated, suffered a strange fate. He was one of the most important thinkers of his time and one of the most universally talented philosophers I know. But he was forgotten, so thoroughly forgotten that for a long time he was not mentioned even in the largest works of reference, such as the Encyclopaedia Britannica. He was nevertheless so far ahead of his time that the great Swedish philosopher Anders Wedberg, teacher of Jan Berg, begins the third volume of his History of Philosophy, the volume on 20th century philosophy, with a chapter exclusively on Bolzano.

It is partly due to chance that Bolzano fell that much into oblivion. After studying philosophy, theology and mathematics at the University of Prague, finishing his Ph. D. thesis on geometry in 1804, he was ordained as a priest in 1805. Then, at the age of 24, he applied for three different posts at the same time: the chair of mathematics, the chair of religious studies, both at the University of Prague, and the post of a high school teacher (Gymnasiallehrer). It was bad luck for his publication activities, but good luck for us, that he received the chair of religious studies (Religionslehre). This chair had been established by the Habsburgian administration in order to counteract what was called the "upcoming freethinking tendencies among the youth". But the real purpose was to keep the youth away from the influences of the French Revolution, and Bolzano was certainly not well-suited to do this. It was one of Bolzano's tasks to edify the young people morally and intellectually by reading lectures and preaching on Sundays. He acted accordingly, especially by the edifi-

1. I am grateful to Sibylle Neumann for her meticulous translation of this article from German into English.
cation lectures (*Erbauungsreden*) which he gave from 1805 till January 1820, sometimes to an audience of 1000 students and Prague citizens. Some of these edification lectures were published in 1813; they were a main cause for his dismissal from his lectureship in 1819. These edification lectures and his treatise *Vom besten Staate* constitute the first of four domains that I will single out on which Bolzano provided a lasting legacy. The remaining three domains are ethics and theology, logics and semantics, and mathematics.

In all of these domains Bolzano was in sharp opposition to the prevailing philosophical fashion of his time. As Wedberg remarks, we do not find in Bolzano the grandiose words and alluring vistas which were characteristic for the romanticists, but rather minute reflections and investigations progressing step by step (cf. Wedberg 1984, 51). Bolzano was as much a mathematician as a philosopher; and in both fields rigor in definitions and reasoning are characteristic of his work. Bolzano’s success is due to his ability to develop concepts. He comments on this himself as follows:

> Only by that means, only by determining concepts more exactly, I acquired all those characteristic theories and opinions you find in all my writings, even in the mathematical ones. (Letter to Romang, May 1st 1847, quoted after Berg 1962, 13)\(^2\)

His characteristic strength was a peculiar combination of critical sensitivity to problems and a sound constructive intuition. The former furnished him with intellectual independence: where others uncritically followed traditional thought patterns, he became aware of problems and of tacit and untenable presuppositions. His second ability, constructive intuition, made him a great and original systematizer. He had not merely separate insights, but also had a sure eye for their interrelations. This becomes especially clear in the *Wissenschaftslehre*, where he laid completely new semantico-logical foundations for the sciences.

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