

EPISODES FROM THE FECHNER DIARIES

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ABSTRACT

Biographical writings about the life and accomplishments of the eminent German psychophysicist, Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801-1887), have relied heavily on poorly validated, secondary sources. The present paper provides a glimpse into Fechner's rediscovered diaries for the period from 1828-1879. Illustrations are provided of Fechner's (1) sensitive and original personality sketches of his friend, Grimmer, (2) the description of his "mysterious illness," (3) social concerns dear to Fechner and his wife, and (4) his skill as a social historian. The paper concludes with information about other discovered collections of papers and documents pertaining to Fechner.

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Although most recent authors have made at least some use of primary sources in presentations of major theories and scientific accomplishments of "Eminent Contributors to Psychology" (Watson, 1974), archival and documentary resources have been utilized only rarely in the preparation of biographical accounts of famous psychologists. Yet such primary source materials have long been available to scholars.

Major sources of disinformation in the history of psychology can be found in such widely quoted works as Boring's *A History of*

Experimental Psychology (1929, 1950) or Roback's *History of American Psychology* (1952), and it is not at all difficult to find later publications with the same handicaps. If biographical writings in the field are to attain the high standards set by works like Ellenberger's story of psychoanalysis, *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (1970), researchers in the history of psychology must seek and use archival sources to a far greater degree than has been done in the recent past.

With this perspective, we wish to share with you our explorations of the largely unpublished diaries of the physicist, statistician, experimental psychologist, philosopher, and scientific satirist, Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801-1887), whose memory we honor today.

HISTORY OF THE FECHNER PAPERS. THE FECHNER ARCHIVE

Copious archival materials pertaining to Fechner's life and work have been available to interested scholars since his death from a stroke on November 18, 1887. Fechner's widow, Mrs. Klara Fechner (née Volkmann), asked Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) shortly after her husband's death, to serve as the executor of his estate (Wundt, 1901, p. 62). In this capacity Wundt organized a vast accumulation of private papers, which initially remained in family hands. These papers were used extensively by Fechner's "nephew and foster son" (Wundt to Ebbinghaus, 1887) Johannes Emil Kuntze (1824-1894), in the preparation of his uncle's first and most comprehensive biography, Gustav Theodor Fechner (Dr. Mises). *Ein deutsches Gelehrtenleben*. [Gustav Theodor Fechner (Dr. Mises). *The Life of a German Scholar*] (1892). After Kuntze's death, the Fechner papers were turned over to the Sächsische Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften (Royal Saxon Academy of Sciences) (Wundt to Koenigsberger, 1902). This valuable and unique collection of Fechner autographs and documents was destroyed during a British bombing attack on Leipzig on December 12, 1943 (Fussler, 1961).

THE FECHNER DIARIES

"Seven packets of Fechner diaries," which also belonged to Fechner's estate, remained in family hands until the late 1920s (Wirth, 1938), when they were acquired by the Chief Librarian of Leipzig University. The diaries survived World War II because they were stored in rural areas less affected by the war.

Information about this unidentified cache of Fechner papers was first received during an initial visit to Karl-Marx-Universität in May of 1978. A second visit in 1983 led to these materials of Fechner's "lost diary."

In the hope of encouraging other Fechner enthusiasts to invest some time and effort in making these important autobiographical sources available to scholars and students in the history of psychology, four selections from the Fechner diary shall be described in this paper.

A GLIMPSE OF FECHNER DESCRIPTION

Fechner's diaries between 1828 and 1879 are preserved in six large archival boxes in the Manuscript Division of Karl-Marx-University in Leipzig, in the old University Library on Beethovenstrasse. The daily record provides novel, interesting information about Fechner and his circle of friends, relatives, acquaintances and colleagues. Routine events found in the diaries often become the point of departure for philosophical observations. His mid-nineteenth century notes reveal a comfortable and peaceful life style. Fechner sometimes included poems, riddles, anecdotes, amusing stories, and the spontaneous expressions of the children of friends and relatives also are featured prominently in the diaries. Important details are provided about Leipzig and the university. Again and again, discussions of his scientific theories and experiments can be found, and of special interest are the accounts of his dreams and those of his friends.

A STRANGE FRIEND

The first selection is taken from the winter of 1831. The thirty-year-old Fechner had just been appointed as an Associate Professor of Physics at Leipzig University in recognition of his pioneering studies on Ohm's Law. Fechner described his long-time friend, the one-time theologian, unsuccessful composer, and eventual bookstore proprietor, Friedrich Grimmer, and his living conditions as follows (Fechner, 1831):

A depressing melancholy rests on the entire room. The lamp burns with a tall, searing flame and spreads unpleasant, choking fumes. An empty snuff box rests on the table like an open coffin, and the coffee mill rattles like a freezing skeleton. Grimmer, dressed in an old bathrobe, is suffering another spell of depression. What else can I do but develop a melancholic outlook on life myself? I throw myself on the couch and try to create some unhappy thoughts of my own. It is not easy to become depressed in a cold room; one can't really gain a comfortable and refreshing sense of desperation under these conditions. After I have wrapped myself in my overcoat and sat on the red couch like a gray cloud in the setting sun, it becomes a little easier to be unhappy. (p. 1)

Finally, Grimmer agrees to go for a walk with Fechner. They fetch their mutual friend, the philosopher, Hermann Weisse, and discuss philosophical topics and the personal quirks of Grimmer as they walk. Grimmer cannot make decisions, and demonstrates this problem when they reach a nearby tavern:

What shall Grimmer drink? One can drink all kinds of beer. Beer from Gersdorf, light beer, dark beer, even imported beer. There is tea and, of course, coffee, as well as different brands of wine and liqueur. Grimmer compares all alternatives carefully. Beer is too cold, tea has no character,

brandy is too vulgar, and warm beer makes him sleepy. He opens his mouth to call the innkeeper, but closes it again. Next, he tells him to come but sends him away without ordering. A moment later, he calls him again, and orders a beverage, only to change his mind and submit another order, which he changes as well. At long last, even Grimmer is exhausted and orders, with a tired smile, a cup of tea. (p. 4)

THE MYSTERIOUS MALADY

This selection is taken from Fechner's handwritten record of the illness, which he suffered between 1840 and 1843. The lengthy section of the diaries was transcribed in the 1860s by Klara Fechner and, as indicated earlier, was used extensively by Kuntze in the preparation of his uncle's biography. Fechner's illness began with severe headaches (Kuntze, 1892):

Lecturing became difficult for me I was forced to avoid all mathematical studies and deliberations. Consequently, my lectures addressed themselves exclusively only to very popular topics. Thus, I dragged on for a number of years. At the same time, my condition deteriorated. I could not sleep and suffered from attacks of total exhaustion, which robbed me of the ability to think and caused me to lose all interest in life. (p. 107)

In the hope of curing his emotional and cognitive difficulties, Fechner began an ambitious project on subjective color phenomena, which required him to gaze for hours directly at the sun. He was protected only by woefully inadequate tinted glasses, which he had constructed himself.

Space does not permit a lengthy chronicle of Fechner's long illness from his daily records, however, it is clear that Fechner viewed his condition primarily as a physical disorder affecting his head and eyes. He generally minimized the emotional and cognitive problems he experienced.

CHRISTMAS 1862.

Our next glimpse of Fechner's life was selected from his description of the family holiday celebrations on December 24-26, 1862. Our selection provides insight into Fechner's views on social issues.

In the traditional manner, Fechner and his wife celebrated Christmas on the 24th of December, Christmas Eve. They spent Christmas Day with relatives. Gifts were exchanged on the 24th, as well as Christmas morning, and again on the evening of the 25th.

Fechner's wife gave him a "leather pillow [for his desk chair], a vest, a silk tie, and a large bowl with raisins, figs, dates, and Brazil nuts." He gave his wife "a dozen linen handkerchiefs, six photographs of assorted relatives,

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money for [her] good works among poor women [in Leipzig], a dozen stamped envelopes, four bottles of liqueur, skin cream, coconut oil soap and a pair of silk gloves" (Fechner, 1862, p. 1).

His "reader" received "new trousers, handkerchiefs, a washrag with soap, a wallet, a pocket knife, a book with riddles, a calendar, pencils and paper, and a newly minted coin" (Fechner, 1862, p. 1).

The foster child received new clothes, and her little friend was given "a picture book, a little doll, two tin candlesticks with colored candles, and a shiny new coin" (Fechner, 1862, p. 1).

The "foster child" was born "out of wedlock" and had been treated by her father, an alcoholic shoemaker, in an "inhuman manner" (Fechner, 1862, p. 2). Fechner mentions "several holes in her head" and a "broken nose" as evidence of the brutal treatment. He characterized the girl's mother as a "Vettel" or tramp, who "paid little attention to her offspring." Mrs. Fechner had learned about the abused child after her transfer to a "third shelter."

FECHNER AND MASARYK

Our final example of the content of the Fechner diaries concerns a young man who talked to Fechner about the language question in Austria and Czechoslovakia between Slavs and German-speakers. He suggested that Austria should establish a German and a Czech university in Prague to improve the relationships between the two nationalities. He acknowledged that the Czech language was inadequate for the discussion of philosophical issues and that he, himself, had to think about these matters in German.

The conversation ended with a lively debate about the opposition of Czech speakers to borrowing words from German. Fechner identified his young guest as a "Mr. Masaryk." The philosopher Tomas Garrigue Masaryk (1850-1937) was the son of a Slovak coachman on an Austrian estate. He received his Ph.D. in Vienna in 1876 and later spent some time in Leipzig as an audit student. He became a professor of philosophy at the Czech University of Prague in 1882. Masaryk later played a major role in the foundation of Czechoslovakia as a modern democracy in 1918 by serving as its first elected president from 1918 to 1934.

DISCUSSION

Important autographs, which cover most of Fechner's life, still exist, and they can provide new information about his life and work. Perhaps a joint research venture between scholars in the history of psychology from East and West will make it possible for us to gain greater access to the treasures of Fechner's diaries. Fechner's importance for scientific psychology is well

established, and he rightfully holds a position of high distinction in the history of the field.

Continued collection and preservation of archival information from all facets of the field of psychology should be a concern of utmost importance to us all. We can never recover documents such as those destroyed in WWII, but we can seek to more conscientiously collect and preserve the records of contemporary psychology with greater care than has been the case with older archival and documentary information.

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