

James and Stumpf

Similarities and differences

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***Abstract:** This essay intends to trace the development of the relationship between William James and Carl Stumpf, till the former's death. Despite deep respect and mutual appreciation and understanding, there was less in common than could be suspected at first glance, owing to their inclination to phenomenology and their rejection of Wundt's new psychology. An attempt is made to highlight the grounds for their divergent views. Still the final evaluation of James' character by Carl Stumpf (in a little book devoted to his life and work) bears witness to a remarkable and fruitful cultural-scientific exchange and to the personal motives of a longstanding friendship.*

***Zusammenfassung:** Dieser Beitrag möchte die Beziehung zwischen William James und Carl Stumpf bis zum Tode des Erstgenannten nachzeichnen. Trotz der Hochachtung und gegenseitigen Wertschätzung und des Verständnisses füreinander hatten beide weniger gemeinsam als man auf den ersten Blick annimmt, weil beide der Phänomenologie zuneigten und die Wundtsche neue Psychologie ablehnten. Es wird hier der Versuch unternommen, die Grundlage der Verschiedenheiten herauszustellen. Die abschließende Bewertung von James' Charakter durch Stumpf (in einem kleinen Buch, das dessen Leben und Werk gewidmet ist) legt von dem bemerkenswerten und fruchtbaren kulturell-wissenschaftlichen Austausch und den persönlichen Motiven einer langen Freundschaft Zeugnis ab.*

William James, born in 1842, was only six years older than Carl Stumpf, though the latter went through a much faster academic career starting with the appointment in Würzburg as a successor to Brentano, when he was 25, followed by appointments in Prague, 1879, Halle, 1884, München, 1889 and finally Berlin, 1893. While James died of heart disease in 1910, Stumpf enjoyed at the same time a productive period of writing and research and worked practically until his death in 1936. His important epistemological work in two volumes, *Erkenntnislehre* (1939-1940) was published posthumously. Owing to the fact that James turned almost completely to philosophy after publishing his *magnum opus*, the *Principles of Psychology* (1890), there is a relatively short overlap time in their strictly

psychological activity, even if the second volume of Stumpf's outstanding *Tonpsychologie* appeared in the same year as James' *Principles*.

Notwithstanding their deep and longstanding friendship they met only twice in their life, that is in Prague, 1882 (and it was for James an important occasion, as he met also Hering and Mach) and in München, 1892. The correspondence between the two bears testimony of a close relationship. Suffice it to quote from a letter of James¹, 1890:

„My dear Stumpf, it gave me the greatest pleasure to get your letter today. There is a solidity of heartiness, so to call it, in the tone of your letters, of which you of course are not aware yourself as a peculiar quality, but which is altogether personal, and which makes me especially rejoice in the possession of you as a friend and correspondent. It is partly *deutsch*; but not all the *Deutschen* have it; so I make the most of it.“ (p.101)

and from a letter of Stumpf of 1893:

«Lieber James, Sie sind ein volles Jahr in Europa - ein Jahr, auf das ich mich seit 10 Jahren gefreut hatte - : und von diesem Jahr entfallen auf unseres Wiedersehen wenige Stunden, in denen noch dazu Ihr Denken und Fühlen durch dringende Angelegenheiten in Anspruch genommen ist! Ich kann Ihnen dies natürlich nicht zum Vorwurf machen, aber ich bin traurig darüber, und um so trauriger, als ich - um es offen zu sagen - das unbestimmte Gefühl habe, dass Ihre Freundschaft zu mir in den Jahren doch etwas an Lebendigkeit eingebüsst habe, das Sie vielleicht darin nicht gefunden, was Sie Anfangs sich versprochen, oder dass irgend etwas an mir Ihnen direct befremdlich oder unsympatisch erschien» (p. 739-49).

Their shared negative evaluation both of Spencer's constructive philosophy and of Wundt's approach is so well known that there is no need to go in detail here (furthermore Stumpf was involved with Wundt in a bitter controversy). James though went much farther than Stumpf in his rejection of some of the most important trends of the new psychology. In 1886 he writes:

«As though anything important at all could follow from time measurements as such; as though these themselves did not have to be interpreted by inner observation; as though finally, numbers rather than clear concepts, were the chief thing!»
 «How often already has not psychology been made "exact" in this way, only to be led back again into the path - into "psychological" psychology!» (p. 67)

and later in 1889:

«...I have become more and more convinced of the difficulty of treating psychology without introducing some true and suitable philosophical doctrine» (p. 75).

In 1892 James' attitude grows even more radical:

«...almost the entire upshot of the work of the exact school of psycho-physic experiment, including especially the work of Wundt's laboratory, tends to show that *no* experimentation can be exact enough to be of any value. The result will be to abandon experimentation altogether, as a false and fruitless direction of activity!» (p. 181)

and in 1894:

«I consider all the detailed work which I carry on as unimportant in comparison with the great questions which will for all time constitute the heart and soul of philosophy» (p. 173);

until in 1899 he was to write:

«I find myself growing less psychological - I have nowadays a perfect horror of experimental psychology, for which fortunately Münsterberg is exclusively responsible - and more metaphysical» (p. 193)

and:

«I fear I am ceasing to be a psychologist, and becoming exclusively a moralist and metaphysician» (p. 195).

James had already expressed his appreciation of Stumpf's work „*Ueber den psychologischen Ursprung der Raumvorstellung*“ (1873). In 1884, having read the first volume of the *Tonpsychologie*, he writes:

«What I care for most in the book is, of course, its general theoretic tendency - away from “psycho-mythology” and logicalism, and towards a truly empirical and sensationalistic point of view, which I am persuaded is the only practical and solid basis for psychological science» (p. 62)

«I enjoyed immensely your treatment of *Ähnlichkeit*, of *Distanz*, and of *Tonhöhe*, as immediate perceptions of sense, and not logical inferences from other related facts» (p. 62-3).

And in 1889 he comments as follows, answering a letter from Stumpf with the good news that the second volume of the *Tonpsychologie* is forthcoming:

«I am ... very glad that your second volume is so forward. Being the musical barbarian that I am, I very much fear that I cannot assimilate it as well as I did the first» (p. 71).

In 1894 he was to acknowledge the work's importance:

«You have done a monumental piece of work, which will be a model to all time of the way in which general views and the minute study of details can be combined» (p. 174).

Still in 1894 as an outstanding member of the American psychological Community James congratulates Stumpf on the Berlin appointment, after having requested him, the year before, to join the editorial Committee of the new *Psychological Review* :

«My dear Stumpf, first of all, let me congratulate you on the Berlin professorship, for which you were, of course, the most suitable candidate, and your appointment to which made Baldwin, Cattell, Münsterberg and myself all very glad. I only feared that Berlin might prove a rasping, fatiguing and *ungemüthlich* place to live in, and that you might be buying honor, if you accepted the appointment at the price of peace of soul» (p.187).

And many years later, in 1907, he writes:

«My dear Stumpf, you have enriched me in three days with two *Abhandlungen* ... and with your most welcome letter of the 8th... I cannot attack the *Abhandlungen* immediately, as I should like to, but I shall devour them in a month's time, and let you know of my reaction. They both look exciting; and it rejoices me that you too are working more and more into metaphysics, which is the only study worthy of Man! Music and metaphysics! You will receive from me in a week or two the sole product of my muse this winter namely, a little popular book called *Pragmatism*» (p. 202-3).

Stumpf on his part reacts with deep enthusiasm to the publication of the *Principles* and sends James his latest works, asking for comments:

«It seems that you have not yet received the last article which I sent you, "*Über den Begriff der Gemütsbewegung*". Since I there took a position in opposition to your theory, I originally intended to send an accompanying letter... Between Brentano and me things have taken a curious turn. I thought that I was rather in agreement with him, in respect of the emotions, and now I receive a letter from him, seven pages long, in which he definitely declares himself for your views and against mine» (1899, p. 194).

In the meantime with Stumpf's help James became in 1900 a member of the Berlin Academy of Sciences.

James sent him his new book „The varieties of religious experience“, that he considered „too biological for the religious, too religious for biologists“. Here is Stumpf's delayed reaction:

«It is indeed very wrong of me to have written nothing about it beyond the card, which you must have failed to get. Forgive a man so beset! There was certainly no want of interest on my part. Indeed in my early youth I cherished for years the idea of becoming a Catholic priest, and actually buried myself in theology, until the inner contradictions of dogma drove me, with many qualms, to abandon it. What you report about religious experiences I have for the most part experienced in my own person. I have, however, subsequently become the more insistent on the control and critique of all these emotions, and am obliged to say now that everything sentimental, ecstatic, fulsome and unctuous in these things on the part of grown men, is in the highest degree repugnant to me» (1904, p. 343)

But the disagreements get more and more considerable and in 1907 Stumpf writes:

«Unfortunately, dear and respected friend, a growing divergence seems to have arisen between our views. I cannot reconcile myself to pragmatism and humanism. The positivistic theory of knowledge, in which you approach Mach, seems to me to be impossible and unfruitful... I agree with the earlier more than I do with the present James» (p. 202);

and finally, in a different vein, in 1909:

«It stimulated me... very considerably, and I intend now to occupy myself more closely with your Bergson. Regarding the "last things" I believe my position is closer to yours than in regard to the pragmatic concept of truth» (p. 203).

James came across Stumpf's work while writing on space perception. He had announced his theory in an article entitled „The Spatial *Qualie* „ (1879), theory that later developed in the longest chapter of the *Principles*. James was definitely in harsh disagreement with all the empiricists such as Thomas Brown or Alexander Bain or John Stuart Mill who argued in favour of a purely empirical theory of space-perception, starting from the assumption that space is not found in elementary sensations. On the contrary James adopted a nativistic standpoint, though not without qualifications. As Perry puts it: „... James distinguishes two groups among the sensationalists: those who, like Hering, hold that space is given completely from the first, and those who, like Stumpf and himself, hold that it is given dimly and then developed and articulated by experience“ (II, p.83). James argued that no sensation lacks extensivity: the problem for him,

both psychological and epistemological, was to explain how we arrive at the space we are familiar with, the space of everyday experience, starting from single spaces, the space of sight, of touch, of smell, of taste, all of which are disconnected from one another. Acknowledging that „sense-data whose spaces coalesce into one are yielded by different sense-organs“ (*Principles*, II, p.184) James concludes that we acquire the notion of a „space larger than that which any sensation brings“, a space conceived, not perceived. I am not going here into the many difficulties and contradictions which plague James' theory. James employs particularly the notion of coalescence of spaces and of place-fusion, a notion which to his own eyes is dangerously suspect (he believed fundamentally, in coherence with his pure sensationalistic approach, that sensations do not in fact either coalesce or fuse, but that they seem to do so). Let it be noticed further that James relied on experimental evidence to support his thesis that the feeling of motion is given us as a direct and simple sensation and turned to physiological support for the kinesthetic basis of space-perception, convinced that through physiology it would have been possible to get rid of many of the intellectualistic hypotheses that philosophers-psychologists, especially associationists, had employed in their psychological machinery.

James cannot have been wholly satisfied though with his work, if he could write the following to Stumpf:

«...for, as you know, you seem to me, of all writers on space, the one who, on the whole has thought out the subject most *philosophically*. Of course, the experimental patience, and skill and freshness of observation of the Helmholtzes and Herings are altogether admirable, and perhaps at bottom *worth* more than philosophic ability. Space is really a direfully difficult subject! The third dimension bothers me very much still.» (1887, p. 69-70).

James quotes Stumpf in his *Principles of Psychology* in chapter XIII („Discrimination and Comparison“)². Thus, for example, when he deals with the problem of the „likeness of two objects“, he refers to volume 1 of *Tonpsychologie*, but on the subject of Stumpf's statement „that all differences are differences of composition leads necessarily to an infinite regression when we try to determine the unit“, James does not seem to agree, even though he adds „I finally accept Stumpf's general reasoning“. In any case, it is clear that the theoretical basis is not the same. An example of this is that James criticizes Helmholtz whom he believes to be guilty of confusing the object perceived, the organic conditions of the perception and the sensations which would be excited by the several parts of the object, or by the several organic conditions, *provided* they came into action separately or were separately attended to, and in assuming that what is true of

anyone of those sorts of fact must be true of the other sorts also. James does not accept Helmholtz' point of view, basically because it is based upon the existence of sensations „in a synthetic state“, that is for James in an unconscious state. In the same context, after having emphasized that „the fusion of many *sensations* into one is really the production of one sensation by the cooperation of many *organic conditions* and that what perception fails to discriminate (when it is „synthetic“) is not *sensations* already existent but not singled out, but new objective facts, judged truer than the facts already synthetically perceived“ he attacks Stumpf (as well as Lotze), whom he feels are guilty of what he calls „the psychologist's fallacy“ (more or less a distortion of the description and explanation of the primitive way of feeling things, on the basis of a later knowledge of them). I shall quote Stumpf's original and James' comment to clarify the nature of the disagreement.

Stumpf says:

„Of coexistent sensations there are always a large number undiscriminated in consciousness, or (if one prefers to call what is undiscriminated unconscious) in the soul. They are, however, not found into a single quality. When, on entering a room, we receive sensations of odor and warmth together, without expressly attending to either, the two qualities of sensation are not, as it were, an entirely new simple quality, which first at the moment in which attention analytically steps in changes into smell and warmth... In such cases we find ourselves in presence of an indefinable, unnamable total of feeling. And when, after successfully analyzing this total, we call it back to memory, as it was in its unanalyzed state, and compare it with the elements we have found, the latter (as it seems to me) may be recognized as real parts contained in the former, and the former seen to be their sum. So, for example, when we clearly perceive that the content of our sensation of oil of peppermint is partly a sensation of taste and partly one of temperature.“

James comments:

„I should prefer to say that we perceive that objective fact, known to us as the peppermint taste, to contain those other objective facts known as aromatic or sapid quality and coldness respectively. No ground to suppose that the vehicle of this last very complex perception has any identity with the earlier psychosis - least of all is contained in it!“

James emphasizes therefore his absolute faith in direct experience, defending its global quality, and doubting that it can ever be reduced to a sum of elements, that otherwise his fundamental adherence to the experiential Berkeleyian theory of

esse est sentiri would risk contamination by the dangerous reappearance of the theory which James had fought against most strongly, the „Mind-Stuff“ theory. This, then, is the motivation behind his criticism of Stumpf, although one can also see James' aversion for the introduction of sensations in the unconscious state - made necessary as an ad hoc hypothesis both in Helmholtz and in Stumpf. (In the latter case this is a descriptive unconscious - Stumpf uses the term „*unbemerkt* „ in reference to sensations).

There is however a Stumpf he continues to like, the antiatomist Stumpf, the Stumpf who criticizes artificial and complicated explanations, who supports direct experience. This is the case in the passage quoted above, of the likeness between two sensations and also therefore the distance between them, which requires an altogether different evaluation of the whole of Fechnerian psychophysics and its development. James accepts - or seems to accept - Stumpf's thesis that „it appears impracticable to define all possible cases of likeness as partial identity plus partial disparity; and it is vain to seek in all cases for identical elements“, a thesis based upon a rigorous proof - given in a footnote - of *reductio ad absurdum*, implying a *reductio ad infinitum*. The conclusion is that likeness and difference are ultimate relations perceived (James speaks, picturesquely, of a shock of difference). He is content, therefore, to quote Stumpf's opinion as support in his critical discussion of the theoretical interpretation of Weber's law:

„One sensation cannot be a multiple of another. If it could, we ought to be able to subtract the one from the other, and to feel the remainder by itself. Every sensation presents itself as an indivisible unit.“

But still James could not be happy with some theoretical (and not only theoretical) assumptions made by Stumpf, especially with Stumpf's whole doctrine of *Mehrheitslehre*. Stumpf distinguished - as it is known - between psychological parts, later called dependent parts or attributes, which were inseparable even in the imagination from physical or independent parts. This was a reintegration from a psychological point of view of the traditional distinction between substance and attributes. In this case the substance was perceived as a unit, a fusion of parts, whilst attributes were interpretable as dependent parts. The clearest example is the relation between spatial extension and colour. Whilst spatial extension is quite conceivable - and can even be experienced (as in some touch experiences of blind people) - color cannot exist without extension. James decidedly not only doesn't agree but probably doesn't fully understand the issue. He is, indeed, not very interested in the Kantian problem of a priori, and certainly not wholly convergent with Brentano's philosophical approach. He is a new type of empiricist, but follows in the footsteps of Berkeley, and is therefore not involved in the complex elaboration which leads Brentano, for example, to the

distinction between „*Introspektion und innere Wahrnehmung* ... He respects Kant, but does not, because of different theoretical motivations and cultural background, enter into an aggressive criticism like that which Stumpf makes of synthetic *a priori* (see for example „*Psychologie und Erkenntnistheorie* „ of 1891). Thus, he does not notice the great theoretical innovation introduced by Stumpf, even earlier than Husserl, that which has been defined as analytic *a posteriori*: the discovery, at the phenomenological level, of structural regularities in empirical material. The example of the relationship between spatial extension and colour should show that some relationships are unimagineable, not out of a weakness of our imagination, but because our intuitive grasp of the phenomena imposes upon us the existence of structural properties or relations the opposite of which is unconceivable. This amounts to a kind of *a posteriori* necessity, in sharp contrast with Kantian views and in continuity with such concepts as Husserl's material ontology.

So, using his own categories, James can try to equate Stumpf's position with a special kind or variant of psychic chemistry, just the kind of theory he most harshly condemned. It should also be noted that the problems of the relationship between sensation and the existence of the objects related to it is one of the most complicated considerations of the Brentanian school, and that in his maturer writings, Stumpf goes clearly beyond the Brentano's foundation of evidence, proposing his own conception of phenomenology. With characteristic intellectual honesty, here is James' reaction:

«The thing of yours that has most interested me of late is the *Erscheinungen und psychische Funktionen*, wherein you differ from things that I have printed in a way to make me take notice and revise» (p. 204).

It is not obviously chance, in my opinion, that James appreciates „*Erscheinungen und psychische Funktionen* „ but says nothing about the complex „*Zur Einteilung der Wissenschaften* ... I think that the ideas which inspire Stumpf are mostly quite far from James' interests. To start with, the proposal of a tripartition between phenomenology (science or, rather, pre-science - *Vorwissenschaft* - neutral and thus destined to precede any other science), as the study of primary and secondary phenomena (respectively, appearances of sensation - *Sinneserscheinungen* - and images in the memory), eidology, as a discipline which studies things which are not immediately given, but worked out mentally (for example - *Inbegriffe* -, states of affairs - *Sachverhalte* -, concepts - *Begriffe* - and so on, called by Stumpf „*Gebilde* „) and a general theory of relationships.

In this context, Stumpf's studies do not represent contributions to psychology, but rather to phenomenology (psychology was destined, as a science, to deal with

psychic functions and the origin of concepts), with an important specification: Stumpf claims to have proved, practically as well as theoretically, the possibility of an experimental phenomenology which consists essentially (see for example the research in *Tonpsychologie*) in studying the phenomenal properties of the object - the sound - by varying experimentally the conditions in which they arise. Rightly, then, Boring maintains that Stumpf's influence on the embryonic *Gestaltpsychologie* was not one of content or of philosophical approach but one of method, especially as regards the idea of experimental phenomenology.

Phenomenology as a new discipline covered a no man's land previously divided between physicists, physiologists and psychologists, whose object of inquiry, mainly sensations, gave rise to unending controversy, in trying to separate physical from psychological aspects and then relating them again in psychophysical formulations. In advocating phenomenology as a separate field Stumpf is really trying to move beyond sterile disputes on the classification of certain kinds of phenomena. (Didn't Helmholtz think that problems of sensation were somewhere at the upper end of physiological inquiry and at the lower end of psychological research?) Following Stumpf's proposal phenomenology as a discipline could now constitute the introduction - necessary introduction - to scientific textbooks in such areas as physics, physiology and psychology, leaving for those disciplines the search for causal factors and causal dependence of the phenomena it had previously attempted to describe.

But James was moving in a very different direction. His pragmatic doctrine, which seemed to have a remarkable success, offended Stumpf's philosophical values, those for which he had always fought. Notwithstanding his distance from the questions that James tackled in his „A pluralistic universe“, Stumpf claims, with some effort, to be interested in some of the ideas in this book rather than in those on pragmatism. This means an opening towards metaphysics, not towards the utilitarian standpoint. Stumpf was always to suspect James' last work, also because it seemed to him to be insufficiently rigorous from a philosophical point of view. James, in some sense, is not immune to discomfort if he tries to satisfy the request implicitly made by Stumpf in his last work, published posthumously, *Some problems of philosophy*, certainly easier to appreciate for Stumpf than the writings collected in *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, where the similarity of James' position with those of his colleague Mach in Prague seemed beyond doubt and the doctrine unacceptable. But there is also a disagreement between the two, concerning the very interpretation of what a discipline like psychology should be and what should be the field of phenomena to which it should refer.

James had always been interested in phenomena of abnormal and paranormal psychology. Stumpf was perhaps not able to consider the relevant material, which also, mainly, appeared posthumously. In any case he could not have any

sympathy for James' interest in studying psychological phenomena, already identified in a normal individual, in altered states of consciousness: see, for example, in the chapter „Discrimination and Comparison“, already quoted several times, a note on the evaluation of the size of a difference under the influence of chloroform (the „distance“ between sensations turns out to be greatly increased), or a note like that quoted in a letter of 1886 („I'm hypnotizing, on large scale, the students“) or, in a letter of 1894, the statement that Janet's work *L'état mental des hystériques* was worth more than all „exact“ laboratory measurements put together.

These Jamesian interests are, in my opinion, connected to a concept of experience which is particularly his and which explains a certain inclination towards mysticism or an enthusiasm for the radical anti-intellectualism of Bergson's philosophy. James eulogises the primary form of experience, „knowledge by acquaintance“ as opposed to any other form of knowledge, the immediacy of the contact it offers with reality. An interpreter was to say of him: „The life-world alone is *really* real.“ (J. Wild, 1969). This is why any attempt to connect James with *stricto sensu* Husserlian phenomenology is doomed to fail. The bracketing of existence is uncongenial to James, while the immediacy of sensation and feelings, even of feelings of relation, see his nativistic inclination, is an instinctive attitude.

An historian of psychology, Rand Evans, in a paper devoted to „James and his Principles“ writes: „In fact, William James was much the same type of transitional figure in America as Wilhelm Wundt was in Europe. They both stood at the margin between the new, experiential psychology and the older philosophical psychology. ...In the long run James' scientific but non-experimental book probably influenced more experimental research than did Wundt's more experimental book.“ (M.G. Johnson - T.B. Henley, 1990). Isn't this passion for science then, science based on observation much more than on experiment-science connected with philosophy and even with metaphysics, the real link between James and Stumpf, so as to make him say with his usual psychological subtlety in a 1894 letter:

„It's a strange fact - for your positive and constructive ideas seem to have no great similarity to mine - that I feel you, perhaps more than any other psychologist whom I read today, to be a *gleichgesinnter Mensch* with myself“ ?

In his old age Stumpf honoured his friend's memory in a little book, a sort of review of James' letters edited by his son Henry in 1920, *William James nach seinen Briefen, Leben - Charakter - Lehre*, noting all their disagreements and at the same time acknowledging one of the most typical of James' inclinations:

„... die ueberquellende Herzlichkeit seines Wesens und die Neigung, ueberall das Gute zu sehen, ja es bei anderen in weit vergrösserten Maßstabe zu sehen.“

It was an homage to the man and a plea for tolerance against the mounting wave of *Anti-Amerikanismus*. But times were changing and there wasn't much that men like Stumpf could do.

Footnotes

- 1 Quotations from James' and Stumpf's letters in the following pages are traceable to the fundamental work of R.B. Perry, *The thought and character of William James*, 2 vols, Boston, 1935.
- 2 Quotations from James and Stumpf (quoted by James) in the following pages are traceable to the aforementioned chapter XIII („Discrimination and Comparison“) in *Principles of Psychology*.

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