



Was Wundt the first to try to make psychology an independent discipline?

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A recent research rediscovered the figure of Ferdinand Bernard Ueberwasser, a professor at the University of Münster who tried to make psychology an independent discipline almost a century before Wundt. In 1787, Ueberwasser published a book in which he proposed a scientific psychology based on the manipulation of variables and the replication of observations, and that should study areas such as perception, memory, creativity, or empathy. The Napoleonic Wars and the discontinuation of the University of Münster made Ueberwasser's legacy to be almost completely forgotten, until today.



Münster Universität. (cc) Frank Kehren.

All psychologists have learnt in history courses that Wilhem Wundt was the founding father of our discipline, and in particular of experimental psychology. Of course, he was not the first to study mental processes or human behaviour. Philosophical thinking in these areas goes back to at least the classical Greeks. Also, other researchers before Wundt studied areas and phenomena that nowadays are considered as integral parts of psychology. For example, Gustav Fechner and Ernst Weber started psychophysics,

still a very relevant subfield in the study of perception. Their research was highly influential for the specific type of psychology proposed by Wundt.

Although Wundt was not the first psychologist, he is the most influential in the history of psychology, as revealed by a survey among historians (Korn, Davis & Davis, 1991). The importance of Wundt comes from his interest and effort to try and make psychology an independent discipline, that is, separated from physiology or

philosophy. That interest and effort was not present in Fechner, Weber, or other predecessors of Wundt, and it was precisely that interest which made psychology to start and develop until it became what it is today.

However, a recent discovery from a group of German researchers casts doubts over the argument that Wundt was the first to try and propose an independent psychology. Schwartz and Pfister (2016) found evidence that a German professor, Ferdinand Bernard Ueberwasser, attempted the same enterprise, with certain success, almost a century before Wundt.

Ferdinand Bernard Ueberwasser was born on August 13th, 1752, in Meppen, in the territory of the actual Germany. After working as a teacher in several schools, in 1783 he started working as a professor in the Faculty of Philosophy of the recently founded University of Münster. In 1787, Ueberwasser published his most important work, a textbook entitled “Anweisungen zum regelmäßigen Studium der Empirischen Psychologie für die Candidaten der Philosophie zu Münster” (“Instructions for the regular study of empirical psychology for candidates of philosophy at the University of Münster”; hereafter I will refer to this book as “Instructions”). The book was popular and saw a second edition in 1794. He also published other books, for example, about human motivation. Ueberwasser held his position as professor of empirical psychology and logic until his death on January 15th, 1812.

Ueberwasser included in “Instructions” his views about psychology. For example, he distinguished between empirical psychology and scientific psychology. In Ueberwasser's time, as well as in Wundt's, empirical was often interpreted as based on introspection, a perfectly valid and accepted research technique. However, Ueberwasser advocated for a scientific psychology based on a structured introspection, in which manipulation of variables in controlled settings, replication of observations, and quantification were key defining characteristics. In his textbook, Ueberwasser addressed issues such as sensation, perception, memory, creativity, or empathy. He also emphasised the relevance of physiology for the study of psychological phenomena, and he did so a century before William James proposed similar ideas in his “Principles of Psychology” in 1890.

To a large extent, Ueberwasser had the academic freedom and the opportunity to extend his ideas about psychology thanks to the pedagogical vision of the influential politician Franz Friedrich von Fürstenberg. Von Fürstenberg founded the University of Münster in 1780 and implemented an educational reform based on three primary sciences: mathematics, physics, and psychology. With the support of von Fürstenberg, the studies of psychology in Münster had a brilliant future. When Ueberwasser died in 1812, the position of professor of empirical psychology and logic went to Georg Laymann. His appointment seemed to guarantee the continuity of psychology as an independent discipline.

But then, why is Ueberwasser not acclaimed nowadays as the father of psychology? Because politic and military events in the years immediately before and after his death prevented it. During the Napoleonic Wars Münster fell under Prussian, then French, and then again Prussian domination definitively from 1813 on. Prussians ended von Fürstenberg's reform and the University of Münster was closed in 1818. After closing, Laymann, Ueberwasser's successor, abandoned psychology. The ideas and works of Ueberwasser were forgotten and psychology went back to square zero.

In sum, almost a century before Wundt founded his laboratory in Leipzig, another German had already tried to establish psychology as an independent discipline. However, historical events prevented these efforts to take root and psychology had to wait for another century to start. Thus, the main difference between Wundt and Ueberwasser may be that Wundt lived and worked in a historical context that allowed for his ideas to thrive.

References

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