Most historical figures have not had the temperament, wherewithal or skills needed to document their lives and activities. Some died in harness and never took the time to reflect upon their efforts; others had their lives cut short early. Even if we acknowledge that leaders in every field are concerned, at least to a certain degree, with how history treats them, let us agree that there is a spectrum with individuals at one end who are demonstrably concerned with their legacy and place in history (e.g., Winston Churchill) and thus go to considerable effort to enshrine their own version and interpretation of events; at the other end of this spectrum are those whose concerns were largely more quotidian or terrestrial. I need not argue the value of such autobiographical documents to posterity, even accepting their tainted status as legitimate or useful history. Those figures who produced memoirs or left behind detailed dairies offer us the opportunity to delve into the past. Their volumes seduce with total emersion, the chance to see a by-gone world in toto, and hear it described with a single, albeit hardly objective, voice. Whether settling old scores, bemoaning the changes time has wrought, or describing events in which he himself did not participate directly, it is sufficient to state that Wilhelm Wundt’s memoirs offer unique insights into 19th century German science, especially psychology.

My point of departure for the translation of Wundt’s memoirs into English is an abiding interest in the power of ideas on society as well as their originator’s own perception of how these ideas have been received and effected intellectual and cultural life. This essay begins by introducing Wundt and briefly reviewing the literature on his life and work. I then discuss a single issue within Wundtian scholarship as it relates to his memoirs, followed by a general selection of several passages in translation to illustrate the book’s import to various fields. I subsequently discuss Wundt historiography, his views on politics and society, and conclude with an illustration of Wundt’s vision of future civilization. I argue for a more synthetic vision of Wundt’s work than has generally been presented to date, one that sees his experimental work and Völkerpsychologie as congruent elements of his weltanschauung.

Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) is widely recognized as experimental psychology’s intellectual and institutional founding father. Trained as a physician and experimental physiologist, he is best noted for his path-breaking Grundzüge der physiologischen
Psychologie (1873-1874) (Principles of Physiological Psychology), the establishment of the psychological journal Philosophische Studien in 1881, and his lengthy tenure as Professor of Inductive Philosophy at Leipzig University (1875-1917) which included the establishment in 1879 of the first laboratory dedicated to experimental psychology and with it effectively the first graduate program in that field. Training graduate students from all corners of the globe resulted in the spread of a particular, energetic vision of experimental psychology and the instrumentation that went with it. Most psychologists today can trace their intellectual heritage directly back to Wundt in Leipzig.

It is thus something of a surprise to note that it was eighty-two years before his memoirs, Erlebtes und Erkanntes (Experienced and Perceived), were first translated from German – and then into Japanese! Given Wundt’s pervasive, appreciable influence, the lack of English and French (not to mention Italian or Spanish) editions sorely hampers our comprehension of the life and work of this seminal scientist. Probing the reasons why, among the pantheon of psychologist autobiographies, Wundt’s has remained relatively unnoted is beyond the scope of this paper. To those who value inquiry into such historiographic matters, the import of his memoirs to our image of Wundt and future research must first be established.

It is even more remarkable that, almost a century after his death, there is no biography of Wundt in English, and those in German do not do justice to his import and impact. (Despite its age, the most thorough of the latter remains the Eisler, 1902. Lamberti’s effort, 1995, should be seen as a vast improvement over Meischner et al., 1979, but is hardly comprehensive.) One notable aspect of this historiographic situation is that contributions to Wundt scholarship come from all quarters; historians1, psychologists2, biologists3, and philosophers4, to name just a few, have each contributed our understanding of particular aspects of Wundt’s life and work. These scholars have researched specific subjects such as the scientific and philosophical origins of his experimental psychology, his place within the neurosciences, the history of technology, philosophy, etc. The literature also includes summaries in encyclopedia entries and various book chapters which draw, more or less, on the many larger, diverse secondary publications. The result of this relative paucity is that we lack a single, biographic vision of Wundt’s work and weltanschauung.

In the year of his death, 1920, Wundt published two volumes (some 900 printed pages!): his memoirs, Erlebtes und Erkanntes and the tenth volume of his magisterial Völkerpsychologie. The first is a synthetic, contextual autobiography, the second is the final volume in a sweeping, but ultimately sterile social psychology. (The term « social psychology » is a loose translation of Völkerpsychologie, yet it seems the best of otherwise poor alternatives such as « folk psychology. ») These two volumes testify to Wundt’s

recognition that his work had already been severely bifurcated; some had seized his experimental work, praised and elevated it, while his *Völkerpsychologie* remained largely ignored, often condemned and eventually forgotten. In his memoirs Wundt observes:

> Every man actually lives multiple lives simultaneously, each one, despite being linked to all the others, running its own special course.

Wundt’s conscious recognition of his work’s fate defined the mission of his last days and it is here that he made his final attempt to explain the unity of his *Völker-* and experimental psychologies.

A question which plagued Wundt scholarship even during his own lifetime was whether there was any methodological congruence in his experimental and social psychological work. Experimental psychologists have long argued that they cannot accept Wundt’s *Völkerpsychologie* on methodological grounds. Yet what if the bases of Wundt’s « two psychologies » were far more similar than different? I choose a single historiographic example to illustrate how our failure to fully appreciate the unity of Wundt’s psychological vision has led to confusion on at least one major point of Wundtian thought and scholarship. The following example is offered not as an example of competing academic opinions into which I seek to weigh, but rather as exemplification that two *bona fide* scholars have read the historical record fundamentally differently.

In an essay in the *Journal for the History of the Behavioral Sciences* on the debate within psychology on its proper subject matter and method, David Leary, 1979, examined Wundt’s conceptualization of psychology and compared the « present… state of considerable turmoil » with those of the past. Among many trenchant points Leary observes that « originally, at least, there was no contradiction… between the natural, social and philosophical disciplines. » Thus the division between natural and social sciences within which we operate and which we enforce is itself an historical construct; in Wundt’s day this division lay elsewhere and was far less rigid. Leary further points out that our current differentiation is the result as much of historical circumstance as of scientific progress. Finally, Leary speaks to the issue of methodology (my emphasis):

> according to Wundt experimental psychology and folk psychology differed both in subject matter and method. They were fundamentally different yet both were valid and necessary to give a rounded understanding of human experience.

More recently, philosopher John Greenwood (2003) argued in the pages of *History of Psychology* that our traditional understanding of the historical Wundt is bunk. Canon states that Wundt maintained that experimental psychology differed from *Völkerpsychologie* in that latter could not be experimentally investigated, but required a different, comparative-historical methodology. The citations most often used to support the traditional claim do not withstand Greenwood’s scrutiny and he points out quite convincingly that Wundt’s own philosophical system does not support such a division. Moreover, Greenwood argues that Wundt « thought the comparative-historical
method at least as objective and scientific as the methods of experimental psychology» and that (my emphasis) « Wundt often claimed that experimental psychology and Völkerpsychologie differ essentially in their methods, not their psychological objects. » Finally, Greenwood notes that Völkerpsychologie never lived up to its social psychological potential, a fact few would dispute.

For Leary, Wundt’s Völker- and experimental psychologies « differed both in subject matter and method » where as for Greenwood these « differ essentially in their methods, not their psychological objects. » Neither Greenwood nor Leary claim their interpretations as their own, but instead cite Wundt himself as their authority. When we consider, as did Leary and Greenwood, that Wundt first taught Völkerpsychologie in 1859, first published on the subject in 1862 (in Beiträge zur Theorie der Sinneswahrnehmung), and « clearly stated the autonomous role of folk psychology in the introduction to the first edition of his classic [1873-1874] Principles of Physiological Psychology » – all « before he received his call to Leipzig [in 1875] » – it is difficult to legitimately see the two « psychologies » as anything other than fundamentally linked in origin, execution and development.

Wundt’s memoirs are full of material relevant to various biographical and historical queries, as the following excerpts from his childhood, his years in Leipzig, and his thoughts on politics and society evidence. In what Wundt described as his earliest, « exceedingly embarrassing » experiences we see not only a focus on traumatic incidents, but also a decisively clinical interpretation.

I was falling down a flight of stairs into a cellar and to this day can still recall feeling my head repeatedly hit the stairs on the way down. I then found myself engulfed in the cellar’s half-darkness. Enmeshed with this moment is the thought that I had gone to the cellar while chasing my father.

Woe is the reader who employs this tale to explain their own difficulties with Wundt’s philosophy! Wundt freely relates other incidents which shed light on his relationship with his father (my emphasis).

As Superintendent my father was present during the occasional class lesson and although he did not customarily interfere with the class he once made a singular exception. Instead of paying attention to the lesson, I was absent-minded and lost in thought, something which later became a regular habit. A slap from my father, a rare event, suddenly tore me from this absentmindedness. I can still see my father’s reproachful face in front of me as evidently his role as attentive auditor was involuntarily transformed into that of home-tutor. In this case, and the same can be said for the effect of fright, pain facilitates a memory’s endurance; the details of this performance would be to me of secondary importance if it were not for my father’s reticence attached to this isolated show of force. This appears to be valid, speaking psychologically, for these earliest of memories all of which appear to follow the rule that there are no isolated events in our consciousness but only ties between events which build coherence and confirm themselves through memory’s reciprocality.
Wundt’s lifespan (1832 to 1920) included a number of major historical events and his recollection carries still a boy-like, awe-struck presentation.

There are few left today who remember when Baden was once an independent Republic for half a year. Fewer still is the number who, at least some of the time, experienced the previous decades with a clear awareness of the events. I belong to these few, and I recall an event which casts a curious light upon the political timbre of those days.

At that time my parents lived in a small town, really a large village, in the middle of [the province of] Baden called Heidelsheim. The day in question fell sometime between 1838 and 1840. I was sitting on the steps of my father’s house having happily just completed my first year of grammar school when… as night fell, a large mob gathered in front of the Bürgermeister’s home. There was a great deal of shouting and suddenly bright flames exploded from the building. I can still clearly see the grave figure of the local magistrate slowly pacing back and forth in my parent’s house; then a squadron of dragoons rode through the center of town scattering the crowd to the four winds.

Perhaps the most seminal of Wundt’s activities was the establishment of his graduate program in experimental psychology in 1879. Erlebtes und Erkanntes includes vignettes and observations about many of Wundt’s students and colleagues. Listing just the Americans and those who settled in North America is virtually a who’s who of 19th and early 20th century American psychology: James Cattell, Edward Titchener, Hugo Munsterberg, G. Stanley Hall, Lightner Witmer, and Charles Hubbard Judd. Many prominent Europeans such as Charles Spearman and Oswald Külpe are also included. Wundt’s interactions with his American students clearly made a deep impression:

Initially the majority of those working in the lab came from mathematics and the natural sciences… The first decades also saw an increase of foreigners a considerable number of whom arrived as advanced researchers… First and foremost came Americans, for there experimental psychology had found particularly fruitful soil, as indicated by the establishment of numerous research institutes. Thereafter students from the Balkans and Russians…

[Of all my co-workers] I wish to mention the three earliest who in their later work have directly or by application remained true to experimental psychology. […] These are: Emil Kraepelin, famed psychiatrist in Munich, […] Alfred Lehmann, representing experimental psychology… in Copenhagen, and James Mackeen Cattell, Professor of Experimental Psychology at Columbia U. in the U.S. […] During his Leipzig days Cattell had assembled a large amount of material on the temporal aspects of psychic functioning which later lay the basis for all subsequent work in the field of chronometric psychology.

Cattell was also my first Assistant. I had gone without one during my first years… even after I’d taken on the responsibilities of running an Institute… Then one day Cattell declared with his well-known American resoluteness: « Herr Professor, you need an Assistant and I’m it! » He carried out the duties of this post, naturally without monetary compensation, until the University made it an official appointment.
The coincidence of his own life’s end with the demise of Wilhelmine Germany focused Wundt’s thinking on politics and society, topics to which he had already given considerable thought. It is not difficult to hear the frustration in his voice as he watches his nation, culture, and body simultaneously give way.

Often enough one hears discussion of the real causes of the German defeat in this war. Any and everything has been blamed: inadequate preparation, leadership error, faltering resolution, the Kaiser’s stubborn-headedness, and so on. [...] In the final chapter of my Völkerpsychologie, which deals with civilization’s future, I considered the history of the German Reich... if rather than uniformity, it had adopted the principle of diversity into its national culture.

Is there not something poignantly prescient in Wundt’s fantasy of a future Germany? Is not subsequent German history just that much more tragic? By 1920 Wundt had been a pillar within his culture for over four decades, yet his hope and vision for Germany was one of diversity not aristocratic privilege. Wundt’s weltanschauung is clearly more complex and nuanced than we have known to date.

As Greenwood and others have pointed out, Wundt’s Völkerpsychologie failed dramatically when compared to his experimental psychology. It is hardly an exaggeration to observe that modern social psychology owes precious little to Wundt’s theories and has indeed deliberately avoided following his lead. Some of this difference can be accounted for by terminological difficulties, but only some:

The psychology of different races (Psychologie der Völker) offers such an abundant and yet largely consonant illustration for the development of social life that one can indeed say today that social psychology (Psychologie der Gesellschaft) is equally an exceedingly rich source.

One quite naturally wonders whether a man of Wundt’s talent and interests had more to say on mankind’s past and future. Did his psychological insight provide him with a deeper understanding of human history and behavior? Witness some of Wundt’s final written words, words which constitute perhaps his most eloquent expression of his motivation and aspiration:

Thrice in our history we have witnessed reversals on a scale equal to... the World War. The first of these was the German Reformation which brought about a general cultural renaissance... The second of these was the horrific war which laid German lands waste for thirty years, yet the end of which saw new religious thinking, a new beginning to German science and a heretofore unparalleled blossoming of German art. The third such reversal is... the World War we have just experienced which must make every people who participated in it consider that the only means available to us today for the regeneration of human culture – to which we all... aspire – is not to progress further on those paths we have been traveling, but to cross over to a new understanding of life’s essentials, its spiritual value whose care is the responsibility of all peoples.
The translation of Wundt’s memoirs involves the rendering of 19th century German into 21st century English for an audience that knows far less about central European history than did Wundt’s. In addition to detailed notes explicating German psychological, medical, et al. concepts, an introduction will clarify the text’s historical importance and provide a background to Wundt’s world. This project is undertaken not only to help clarify (the meaning of) Wundt’s scientific contribution, but also to place him and his work in the context of German and European intellectual and cultural history.

Saving Wundt’s Völkerpsychologie from history’s rubbish bin or showcasing his political prescience is secondary to demonstrating the fundamental congruity of his experimental psychology and Völkerpsychologie in a single psychological vision and the confluence of the political, scientific and personal in the life and work of such an eminent figure. This is useful not only for historians of Europe and science, but for psychologists as well, for as Solomon Diamond has written:

Until we put his career in proper perspective, our view of the process by which psychology became an experimental science will be seriously defective.

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