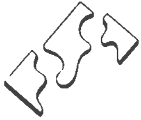

Dialogue with a Human Scientist: William Stern (1871-1938)[1]

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Most psychologists today come across the name of William Stern only in historical footnotes, and that mainly either in connection with the concept of I.Q., which he introduced, or perhaps in connection with the study of child language.[2] In fact, William Stern's contributions to psychology were massive, both in scope and in significance, and there is much that is still of relevance to us today.

William Stern laid the groundwork for many separate subspecialities of psychology. At the same time, and throughout his career, he insisted that the emancipation of psychology from philosophy did not imply that psychology had no need of philosophy. He himself wrote many papers and three volumes (*Person und Sache*) (1906, 1908, 1924) in which he articulated a philosophic grounding for psychology. In *General Psychology from the Personalistic Standpoint* (1938), which he himself regarded as his crowning achievement, philosophical questions arising from the empirical and experimental data are constantly raised. I quote from the introduction to this work:

> *philosophical problems of psychology* do not constitute an isolated province with which empirical psychology need have no concern. On the contrary these problems penetrate the tissue of the empirical sciences of mental life, reducing its findings to order and system, sense and meaning. On the other hand, as special researchers advance they impose upon philosophical psychology limitations, concrete demands, and controls that protect it from the confusion that formerly characterized speculative, unrealistic psychology. (p. 9)

What I propose to do in this paper is to analyze the relation—or better, the interaction—between his empirical and his philosophical endeavors, and to deal with the world-view he articulates, in the context of the time and the world in which he lived. In doing this I hope to generate questions about the world in which *we* live, and what this might imply for the way in which we conduct research in the human sciences today.

William Stern

I begin with a few biographical details. William Stern was born in 1871 in Berlin, where he spent his formative years, including his years of study at the university. In 1896 he moved to Breslau

(Silesia), where his university career began, and where, in a little less than two decades, he generated most of his seminal ideas, and became known internationally. When in 1909, at the age of 38 years, he received an honorary degree from Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, he had already published a number of significant papers. He went to Hamburg in 1916, first as professor in that city's adult education institution, and from 1919 onwards as professor of philosophy, psychology, and education in the newly founded University of Hamburg. In 1933 he became a victim of the Nazi persecution of Jews and was summarily dismissed from his professorship. He found temporary refuge in Holland, where he completed the German version of his *General Psychology from the Personalistic Standpoint*. He left Holland for the United States in 1934 and spent the last four years of his life as professor of psychology at Duke University, North Carolina.

The year in which Stern was born also marks the end of the Franco-Prussian War, the founding of Imperial Germany under Kaiser Wilhelm I, and the elevation of Berlin to the capital of that Empire. It was followed by a period of peace, incredibly rapid industrial expansion, and urbanization as well as unprecedented material prosperity that lasted until 1914, the outbreak of the First World War. Science and increasing specialization in technology seemed, in the view of many people, to make possible unlimited progress. But there was another side to this. In the wake of industrialization there was also grinding poverty, and the cities in which the industrial workers congregated became more and more barren and dehumanized. Within bourgeois society there was growing unease about the shallowness and hollowness of what passed for culture and progress. In this connection must be mentioned the German youth movement commonly referred to as *Wandervogel* (migratory bird), because while Stern was in Breslau he was in close contact with a group of students belonging to this movement. These were young people who rebelled against the society with its commercialism, its moral bankruptcy, and its hypocrisy.

While Stern entered university as a student he found that in professional philosophy there was no recognition of the need that he himself felt very strongly, namely the need to develop a world view (*Weltanschauung*). Dilthey was a professor at Berlin University, but Stern seems not to have come under his influence while a student there, for he says of him in his autobiography (Stern, 1930), "Only much later I realized what a loss it had been that as a student I had formed no closer relationship with the hard but significant personality of Dilthey" (p. 338). He paints a depressing picture of the philosophy being taught at German universities at that time. I quote a few statements which reflect Stern's assessment of the philosophic milieu:

> The collapse of speculative philosophy after the death of Hegel had had a paralyzing effect, the triumphal procession of natural science a downright hypnotic one . . . The conception as well as the word "metaphysics" was in disgrace, and was regarded as a remnant of a transcended age . . . the mechanistic categories of the scientific philosophy were regarded as self-evident and unshakable. (p. 336-337)

Psychology as an academic discipline also was committed to natural science. Stern's teacher in psychology was Herman Ebbinghaus, whose experimental studies of learning and forgetting belong to the classics of the history of psychology. However, while Stern was fascinated by the ingenuity and precision of experimentation in psychology, from the beginning he regretted Ebbinghaus' lack of interest in the philosophical presuppositions of empirical psychological studies.

We turn now to the interaction between Stern's empirical work in psychology and his philosophical endeavors. I shall first give a brief overview of the main areas of his work in psychology, then turn to his philosophical writing, and finally focus on the interaction itself.

Stern's Empirical Work in Psychology

Stern started with a series of experiments in the psychology of perception (Stern, 1898). His experiments were in the tradition of the psychophysics of the nineteenth century, in which a primary concern had been the study of just noticeable differences between stimuli presented. Stern's investigations are important mainly because they show him making tentative and hesitant steps away from the then dominant associationist and elementarist principles of explanation towards a recognition of the role of the person in perception. These investigations were followed by papers on memory and the psychology of testimony (Stern, 1903-1906)[3], a topic which continued to engage his attention and which became part of a wider field of applied psychology, namely forensic psychology. In 1900 he published a book on individual differences (Stern, 1900), in which he offered in programmatic form, the outlines of the new discipline of differential psychology. In a later book he developed this approach quite systematically (Stern, 1911). Together with his wife Clara, he published in 1907 a book on child language which was based on Clara Stern's diaries of the development of their three children, born 1900, 1902, and 1904, as well as on all the relevant literature available at the time. Then followed in 1909 a second monograph, also under joint authorship with his wife and again based on the diaries, dealing with memory, verbal reconstruction of events, and fabrication in young children. In 1914 he published the first systematic psychology of early childhood up to the sixth year of age which included new material from the diaries. This book was revised

and brought up to date six times and translated into a number of other languages during his lifetime; in the German language it was also reprinted several times after the Second World War. Stern contributed significantly to the theory and practice of intelligence testing (Stern, 1914; Stern & Lipmann, 1920). He introduced the term "psychotechnique" in 1903, and at Hamburg University he added a Department of Psychotechnics to his Psychological Laboratory. It was characteristic of all his work in psychological testing that he was acutely aware of the misuse to which tests could be put. As Gordon Allport remembers, when Stern came to America "his chief desire was to introduce personalistic psychology into America, to counteract, as he said, the 'pernicious' influence of his earlier invention, the I.Q." (Allport, 1968, p. 324). From the beginning and throughout his academic career he was actively involved in problems of instruction and education, and in supporting educational reform movements, working closely with teachers and young people.

A point that needs to be underlined is that for Stern it was self-evident that psychology had to serve social purposes, that it had to be practical and applied. This is reflected also in the journals which he edited: The *Zeitschrift für angewandte Psychologie* and the *Zeitschrift für pädagogische Psychologie und experimentelle Pädagogik*[4].

Stern's Philosophical Writing

I turn now to Stern's systematic philosophical writing. The title of the three volumes in which his philosophical ideas were crystallized and systematized has already been mentioned: *Person und Sache* (Person and Thing). Each of the three volumes has its own sub title: *Derivation and Foundation* (vol. 1, 1906); *The Human Personality* (vol. 2, 1918); and *Philosophy of Value* (vol. 3, 1924). There were also a number of shorter publications, which prepared the way for, or supplemented, the three volumes.

The distinction between *person* and *thing* has a long history in philosophy. Kant spoke of the Person as having "dignity" and the Thing as having a "price," and this distinction was certainly fundamental for Stern. His son Günther, who was a student of Husserl and is well-known as a philosopher and writer under the name of Anders, relates the following incident. When the prestigious chair of psychology at Berlin University was offered to William Stern on condition that he agreed to a "minor formality," namely baptism, he was indignant. Stern had seldom spoken much about his Jewishness and he was not a practicing Jew, but here his dignity as a person was assailed. Günther Anders remembers that his father often spoke about this experience, not with regret about a lost opportunity, but with pride.

When Stern started his career as a psychologist, there was no room for the concept of person in the science of psychology. The commitment to positivism and to the natural science preconceptions of that time had led to paradoxes for psychology. The very name "psychology" implied that it was the study of the psyche. But "psyche" in the past had had many meanings, and some of them came close to theological and metaphysical notions with which scientific psychology could have no affiliation. In order to become scientific psychology had to become a "psychology without a soul." But by ridding itself of the notion of psyche or soul, it had also made the notion of an "I" or "self" untenable. What up to then had been described as the "I" and defined as the "unity of consciousness" had disappeared. There were two options available: either to rule out reference to the "I" or "self," as strict behaviorism demands, or posit, instead of the "unity of consciousness," the multiplicity and disparateness of the elements of consciousness, as Mach did in his *Analysis of Sensations* (Mach, 1959).

Neither of these options was acceptable to Stern, for they would have the consequence of excluding from the domain of psychology a vast array of questions that in ordinary life we regard as central to human experience: questions having to do with individuality and uniqueness, purpose and meaning, commitment and values. Hugo Münsterberg, who, through the influence of William James came to America in 1892 as professor of psychology and director of the experimental laboratory at Harvard, advocated this: "Psychology has no other aim but, like any natural science, to describe and explain its material, while every interpretation and appreciation of mental life belongs entirely to different spheres of human interest" (Münsterberg, 1909). These other spheres of human interest were "logic, ethics, aesthetics, philosophy of history, and religion." Such tearing apart of the connection between what Münsterberg called "causal psychology, which considers all inner experience as material for description and explanation" and the *person* who has these inner experiences, was totally unacceptable to Stern.

The distinction between *person* and *thing* must also be seen in the light of a philosophical situation in which the only alternative to a naive teleology was a crude mechanistic causality. A very large part of Stern's philosophical analysis in the first volume of *Person und Sache* is concerned with clarifying the relationship between mechanical causality and teleology. His solution was to recognize mechanical causation operating within the context of immanent purposes. This seemed to him to clear away one of the obstacles to the inclusion of the person in a scientific psychology. Stern saw in nature a hierarchy of entities, the properties and behavior of which can be understood not in terms of properties of the parts, but in terms of immanent purposes of the entities themselves. He calls these "persons" in the philosophical sense.

It is the *human* person, however, who is his main concern. He defines the human person as

> a living whole, individual, unique, striving towards goals, self-contained and yet open to the world around him; he is capable of having experience. (Stern, 1938, p. 70)

The attribute *capable of having experience* stands out from all the others:

> Every person *must* be at all times and in all respects a totality possessing life, individual uniqueness, goal-directed activity, independence of and openness to the world, *but not always consciousness.* Even at times when nothing is being "experienced" the person exists, while the loss of any one of the other attributes would suspend existence. (p. 70)

Psychology is then defined as "the science of the person as having experience or as capable of having experience" (pp. 70-71).

It is necessary here to make a comment about the term "experience." In the original German the word used is *Erleben* which retains its link with *leben*, i.e., to live. The prefix "er-" changes the basic verb "to live" significantly, to mean "having an experience as a sentient, feeling, and thinking being." "Experience" must therefore always be seen in its significance for personal existence and life as a whole. It must be noted also, that in the definition of psychology Stern avoids the term "consciousness." He does this because he regards it as having acquired in the course of history too strong an in-built bias towards experience in the sense of intellectual knowing only. *Erleben* as we just have seen is a more inclusive term that enabled him to widen the range of phenomena of consciousness that have relevance to human existence.

This is as far as I want to explicate the thrust of Stern's systematic articulation of his philosophy of the person. This formally developed philosophy influenced his empirical work, but the reverse is also true. Nowhere is it more true than in his contribution to the psychology of early childhood.

Interaction Between Empirical and Philosophical Endeavors

Stern tells us that "the time from the summer of 1900 to 1901 saw the birth of personalism." It was then that he outlined the first draft of the book that was to deal with personalism, and determined the main title, *Person und Sache.* But this was also the time when his first child was born, and his wife Clara started keeping the diaries of their children's development.

The detailed records were kept for each child from birth to age six. What the Sterns did might today be described as exemplifying participative research methodology at its best. Both parents made their observations while fully participating in the lives of their

children. In the evening, with the children safely tucked away in bed, the psychologist/parent Stern would sit down with his wife to go over the day's events, and arrange the notes and impressions, and begin to interpret them as material. It is worth quoting what Stern himself says about the significance that these studies of his children had for clarifying his own philosophical outlook:

> Here I observed *concrete* spiritual life and was thereby guarded against those false schematizations and abstractions which we meet all too often under the name psychology. Here I became aware of the fundamental personalistic fact of *unitas multiplex*: the wealth of phenomena concommitantly or successively observable arrayed themselves in a unified life-line of the developing individual, and received their significance directly from this . . . here I gained conceptual foundations for the dawning philosophical theory. (Stern, 1930, p. 350)

Much of the dawning philosophical theory remains implicit in the two monographs and the book on early child development that followed. We are fortunate to have also some very lucid and penetrating comments by his son Günther Anders. Thinking back at the age of fifty to his childhood, as reflected in excerpts from the diaries, he wrote a preface to the 1952 reprint of *Psychologie der frühen Kindheit* (*Psychology of Early Childhood*). Among the points that he makes is that "seen through the eyes of the philosopher, the book is astonishingly empirical; seen through the eyes of the psychologist it is surprisingly speculative," and he goes on to point out that the book combines natural science and cultural science (*geisteswissenschaftliche*) approaches and neutralizes that customary distinction. He comments on his father's critical attitude towards the role of experiments in psychology. Though William Stern carried out experiments with meticulous attention to detail, he was always the first to point out the limitations of any "results" obtained in this way. His opposition to the exclusive use of experimental methods, his son tells us, was more pronounced in the field of child psychology than in other areas of psychology. The method of the experiment taken over from natural science, seemed to Stern to contain a prejudgment about the nature of the human being, and this prejudgment he could not accept. Stern saw the human being, first and foremost and "by nature," as a *spontaneous*, self-expressive, and self-active being, and not primarily as "reactive": a being, in other words, who not only "answers" but also "speaks." Just as one cannot infer from answers to leading questions what someone really has to say, so the reactions of experimental "subjects" to experimentally controlled stimuli may turn out to be just artifacts of the experimental situation. This is the main reason why in the book on the psychology of early childhood the experimental data play a secondary role, while the emphasis falls on the children's spontaneous self-expression (such as in language and in drawings, in play and in fantasy). The explanatory principles of nat-

ural science could not be of help here, for it is the *meaning* of such self-expressions that has to be made evident, and this involves cultural science approaches and philosophical reflection.

What I have said about Stern's investigation of the psychology of early childhood was intended to show how actual involvement in empirical investigation inevitably had repercussions for his systematic philosophizing about the person. It is surely no coincidence that in the second volume of *Person und Sache*, which was published after the early childhood studies, there is a large section devoted to the clarification of the differences as well as the relations between "reaction" and "spontaneous action." Another example is his extensive research in which measurement and quantification is important. This includes his early work in psychology of perception and then, of course, his massive contributions to the measurement of human abilities. In the second volume of his philosophy of the person Stern discusses thoroughly the presuppositions of categories of mathematical thought.

Stern and Research Methodology

As far as research methodologies are concerned, he was never dogmatic. He was not a phenomenologist, though he was able to give good phenomenological descriptions, especially towards the end of his career. I refer to a paper which Stern delivered at a congress in Copenhagen in 1932 in which he dealt with space and time as personal dimensions (Stern, 1936). It is in my view, an example of phenomenological description at its best, and it opened up a whole new way of viewing old problems of perception and the relation between the sense modalities and their development. Stern brings to light what space and time as personal dimensions are by reflecting on very concrete instances. He starts with the concrete instance of his standing before his audience and presenting a paper and making the statement "I am here now reading a paper." He asks:

> "Here now," what does this mean? "Here" is certainly not the zero point of coordinates in the sense of mathematical space, such as, for example, a point at the centre of my body; "now" just as certainly is not that infinitesimally small and sharp dividing line akin to the zero point in a mathematically calibrated time line—somehow both are *extended* and at the same time *formed*.
>
> "Here" is the total complex of my person together with the lectern, while you the listeners, are "there." But "here" is also the auditorium in contrast to the "there" on the street; "here" is Copenhagen in contrast to Hamburg, my usual "here."
>
> And "now" is the time during which I utter the whole of this sentence. "Now" is also the time that I present the whole of this paper. "Now" is the time of the congress, in contrast with the past or the coming week.

Indeed, it makes sense to utter the paradox: I am "now" teaching in Hamburg—although at this moment I am not there.

It transpires therefore that my person not only lives in an extended "Here and Now" (in contrast with the segmented "Here" and "Now" of mathematics), but at the same time in different Here's and Now's, which form layers and cross each other (mathematically an impossibility)—and which depending on the particular situation and the personal attitude, stand either in the foreground or in the background and give to my mode of existence a particular structure, a particular "presence". (p. 221)

It is characteristic of Stern's manner of proceeding that, after having given a full phenomenological analysis, he immediately asks: how can we now apply this understanding in different specialised domains? He mentions four broad areas: The psychology of human development; differential psychology; issues of psychological milieu, among which he includes such problems as people having to live in inadequate housing, and the effects of prolonged unemployment on the gradually disintegrating time structures of the individual; he even envisages the possibility of investigating the influence of technology and communication systems on the personal space-time structures of people living today. This sounds very contemporary, particularly the last point, but William Stern said this in 1932, more than half a century ago.

William Stern's Relevance for Human Science Today

It now remains for me to make a few comments on the world in which today we live and frame our questions. I shall refer once again to William Stern's son, who has spoken and written about his father on a number of occasions, some of which I have already mentioned. In December, 1984, my wife and I had the privilege to meet the then 82-year-old Günther Anders in his study in Vienna. The purpose of our visit was to obtain more intimate, direct information about his father, and also to hear his assessment of the relevance to our time of the philosophy that finds expression in his father's psychology.

Despite the great admiration and love he has for his father (an unframed photograph of his father is a permanent part of his austere study) Günther Anders stakes out his own position when commenting on him.

During our interview he emphasized the most striking contrast as being that between his own pessimism and his father's optimism. What he meant by this was not that his father was in some way constitutionally or temperamentally predisposed towards being optimistic, while he himself was not. The optimism and pessimism that he referred to had to be seen in the light of the totally different world in which his father came to generate his seminal ideas around the turn of the century, as compared to the very changed world in which the son found himself before, during, and after World War II.

Anders explains the difference as follows: His father, though anti-positivistic and deploring the anti-metaphysical stance of the positivists, nevertheless shared their optimism with regard to the progress of mankind. Auguste Comte had distinguished between the theological, the metaphysical, and the "positive" natural science stages of human history, one gradually being superseded by the next. Round about the turn of the century metaphysics was no longer typically a secularization of the theological issues (as had been the case with most metaphyiscal systems earlier in the nineteenth century); now it had natural science as its point of origin. Stern's metaphysics was not a rejection of natural science, but a reinterpretation of the concept of causality and its relationship to teleology, in order to be able to deal with the fundamental fact of personhood. This was the issue, as we have already seen, that Stern grappled with as early as 1906, in the first volume of *Person und Sache*. For Stern personhood was not now something lying outside the scope of natural science, but within the scope of a science that was to embrace more than natural science had until then encompassed.

With personhood occupying its central place in "psychology as science," there was for him every reason to be optimistic about the application of psychology to the solution of human and societal problems, without reducing persons to things.

His son's philosophy, on the other hand, was formed in an age that witnessed the Holocaust, and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The pessimism of Anders arises not only from the fact that these events occurred, but more abidingly from the fact that people refuse, or are unable to take seriously enough the destructive implications of the technological power which those events have revealed. The nineteenth century, he points out, was preoccupied with the question of thresholds of consciousness for stimuli of minimal intensity (recall that the early experimental work of Stern arose from the same tradition of psychophysics). The preoccupation of our time, Anders asserts, ought to be the thresholds of consciousness at the upper extreme of intensity, i.e., of events that numb us and exceed our present capacity even to imagine. Human beings, he says, must expand their power of imagination, if they are to gain control over the forces that they unleashed. Because they have not gained that control, human beings are as Anders formulates it, "antiquated," adapted to a world that no longer exists. The challenging title of the two volumes of his philosophical anthropology is *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen* (Anders, 1981, 1983).

If Günther Anders is right in his analysis of the world we have created and of our relation to it—and I believe this to be so—then the focus on personhood, which was so important to William Stern, is

surely not invalidated. Nor does his son impy that.[5] What becomes imperative, however, is that the "critical personalism" of Stern be anchored in a critical consciousness of the social, economic, and political realities of the here and now. To develop that theme would take me far beyond what I set out to do in offering the present reflections.

Notes

1. Revised version of a paper read at the Fourth International Human Science Research Conference, May, 1985.
2. There are, however, notable exceptions. In a symposium at the conference of the International Society for the Study of Behavioral Development held in Michigan in 1973, the contributions of William and Clara Stern, of Alfred Binet, and of Eduard Spranger to developmental psychology were highlighted. See Francis P. Hardesty "Overview, texts, and selections" and Klaus Eyferth "The contributions of William and Clara Stern to the onset of developmental psychology" in Klaus Riegel and John Meacham (Eds.), *The Developing Individual in a Changing World*, vol. I, The Hague: Mouton, 1976. See also Frances P. Hardesty, Louis William Stern: A new view of the Hamburg Years *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, vol. 270, pp. 31-44, April, 1976.
3. Günther Anders relates this in an interview contained in Matthias Greffrath *Die Zerstörung einer Zukunft. Gespräche mit emigrierten Sozialwissenschaftlern*, Rohwolt, 1979. In a preface which he wrote for a reissue of the German version of *General Psychology from a Personalistic Standpoint* he mentions that on more than just this one occasion Stern had rejected the "formality of baptism."
4. Stern, W. (1903-1906). *Beiträge zur Psychologie der Aussage*. A journal founded and edited by Stern.
5. Günther Anders dedicates his *Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, the first edition of which appeared in 1956, to his father:

   Exactly one half century ago, in the year 1906, my father William Stern, at that time twenty years younger and by several generations more confident than is his son today, published the first volume of his work *Person and Thing*. With great tenacity he clung to his hope that by opposing an impersonal psychology the "person" could be rehabilitated. His innate goodness and the optimism of the era to which he belonged prevented him for many years from realizing that what turns a "person" into a "thing," is not due to the way in which science views a person but the reality of how people treat people. When overnight he was humiliated and uprooted by the despisers of humanness, he was not spared the agony of realizing that the world is more evil than he had always taken it to be. In memory of him, who has ineradicably implanted in his son the concept of human dignity, these sad pages about the destruction of humanity have been written.

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