

THE FAVOURABLE RECEPTION OF GUSTAV FECHNER'S 'THE LITTLE BOOK OF LIFE AFTER DEATH' IN JAPAN

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Abstract

Gustav Fechner addressed philosophical and religious issues in his works. In 'The Little Book of Life after Death', Fechner expressed a unique view of life and death combining Christian, pantheist and panpsychist motives, which was highly evaluated by William James. We find an association between 'The Little Book' and 'Elements of Psychophysics'—which describes a mutual relationship of many people's conscious states—through a premature idea involving a wave image that later develops into a wave scheme. 'The Little Book' has been translated into many languages, including English, French, Italian, Polish, Dutch, Icelandic and Japanese. Importantly, there are five different Japanese translations, even though there are few Christians in Japan. This study discusses the wide acceptance of Fechner's view of life and death among the Japanese. The reasons behind this acceptance are that his doctrines resembled, at least superficially, traditional Japanese spiritual thoughts and also provided a non-materialistic worldview, which was longed for by the Japanese.

Fechner's view of life and death in *The Little Book*

Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801–1887), the founder of psychophysics, addressed philosophical and religious problems as well as scientific ones in the course of his lifetime. An example of his works is the religious volume, *Das Büchlein vom Leben nach dem Tode* [*The Little Book of Life after Death*] (*The Little Book*) published in 1836 under the pseudonym of Dr. Mises (Dr. Mises, 1836; Fechner, 2005). This book—in which Fechner expressed a unique view on life and death—was published before he became a famous scientist.

The Little Book has thus far been translated into many languages such as English, French, Italian, Polish, Dutch, Icelandic and Japanese. It must be noted that there are five different Japanese translations even though the Christian population is relatively small in Japan as compared to that in Western countries. The purpose of this study is to therefore clarify the reasons behind the wide acceptance of Fechner's view of life and death in *The Little Book* in Japan.

In the beginning of *The Little Book*, Fechner states that man lives on earth in three different stages:

Man lives upon the earth not once, but three times. His first stage of life is a continuous sleep; the second is an alternation between sleeping and waking; the third is an eternal waking.

In the first stage man lives alone in darkness; in the second he lives with companions, near and among others, but detached and in a light which pictures for him the exterior; in the third his life is merged with that of other souls into the higher life of the Supreme Spirit, and he discerns the reality of ultimate things. [...] The passing from the first to the second stage is called birth; the transition from the second to the third is

called death. (Fechner, 2005, pp. 1–2)

‘The first stage’ refers to the stage of the unborn child in the mother’s body. ‘The second stage’ is postnatal, that is, the period from birth until death. According to Fechner, an unborn child in the first stage sleeps continuously, and in the second stage, it leads a life that alternates between sleeping and waking. By comparing these two stages, he infers that if there were life after death, it would be that of eternal waking. For Fechner, the process of man’s life consists of three stages, implying that the third stage ‘death’ does not signify the end of life, but is a part of the three stages of life.

Man thinks that he is in his place for himself alone, for amusement, for work, and getting his bodily and mental growth; he, too, is indeed there for himself; but his body and mind are also but a dwelling place into which new and higher impulses enter, mingle, and develop, and engage in all sorts of processes together, which both constitute the feeling and thinking of the man, and have their higher meaning for the third stage of life. (Fechner, 2005, p. 23)

While the higher spirits not only dwell in individual men, but each extends itself into many, it is they who unite these men spiritually, whether of one form of faith or truth, of one moral or political leaning. All men who have any spiritual fellowship with each other belong to the body of one and the same spirit together, and follow the ideal which has thereby been born within them, as members one of another. Often an idea lives at one time in a whole nation, often is a mass of men moved to one and the same action; that is a mighty spirit which seizes them all in one contagious influence. Not alone, indeed, through the spirits of the dead do these alliances occur, but countless new-born ideas flow from the living to the living; all these ideas, however, which go forth from the living into the world are already parts of its future spiritual organism. (Fechner, 2005, pp. 33–34)

And again, how easy it would all be for faith, if man could habitually see a truth in that further word, that God lives and moves and has His being in all. Then it were not a dead, but, through God, a living world, out of which man is building his future body and is thereby creating a new abode within the dwelling place of God. (Fechner, 2005, p. 107)

Fechner considers the whole material universe to be conscious and that our consciousness and spirits are just wavelets on the surface of the earth. We grow upon the earth as leaves grow upon a tree, and our consciousness arises out of the whole consciousness of the earth. Further, for Fechner, God constitutes the entire consciousness of the whole universe, of which the Earth’s consciousness forms an element just as the human consciousness of individuals forms elements of the consciousness of the whole earth (Fechner, 2005, pp. xii, xv–xvii). According to him, the spirits of the third stage will dwell in a common body on earth of which mankind itself is a part, and all the natural processes of the spirits will be the same as that of the body of man (Fechner, 2005, p. 76). As shown above, Fechner’s thought is pantheistic in the sense that God lives in all, and panpsychistic in the sense that the whole universe possesses consciousness. Fechner’s view in *The Little Book* is a combination of Christian, pantheistic and panpsychistic doctrines.

Although most scientists had no interest in Fechner’s view, William James highly approved of it and wrote an introduction to an English translation of *The Little Book*:

Fechner was, in fact, a philosopher in the “great” sense of the term [...] Little by little the

materialistic generation that called his speculations fantastic has been replaced by one with greater liberty of imagination. Leaders of thought, a Paulsen, a Wundt, a Preyer, a Lasswitz, treat Fechner's pan-psychism as plausible, and write of its author with veneration. Younger men chime in, and Fechner's philosophy promises to become scientifically fashionable. [...] His belief that the whole material universe is conscious in divers spans and wavelengths, inclusions and envelopments, seems assuredly destined to found a school that will grow more systematic and solidified as time goes on. (Fechner, 2005, pp. ix–xii)

The existence of a premature idea of the *Elements of Psychophysics* in *The Little Book*

Fechner published *Elemente der Psychophysic* [*Elements of Psychophysics*] (*Elements*) in 1860 (Fechner, 1998), twenty-four years after the publication of the first edition of *The Little Book* (Dr. Mises, 1836). It is interesting to note that a premature idea of *Elements* exists in *The Little Book*. The following is a brief explanation of an association between the two works (for a preliminary study, see Iwabuchi, 2007).

Fechner describes the following in *Elements*:

Imagine the whole psychophysical activity of man to be a wave, and the degree of this activity to be symbolized by the height of the wave above a horizontal basal line or surface, to which every psychophysically active point contributes an ordinate. (Fechner, 1998, II, S. 454)

According to him, the whole form and evolution of consciousness will depend on the rise and fall of this wave above a threshold (Fechner, 1998, II, S. 454 f.; James, 1898, p. 62). Fechner considered the concept of the threshold as a wave scheme and that this scheme has some similarities to the waves mentioned in *The Little Book*. For example, in *Elements*, he refers to 'our spirit after death' using the wave scheme:

If an image in our eye linked to over-waves leaves a memory afterglow after its disappearance in the eyes, which occurs in a general and higher realm of memories and thoughts of general consciousness or principal consciousness, we may believe that some correspondence will arise in our total waves, as far as they are over-waves above a deep threshold, and that therefore after death our spirit die into a higher realm of spirits in God. (Fechner, 1998, II, S. 542)

We speculate that the association between *Elements* and *The Little Book* is not a superficial one, but an essential one for Fechner, and that Fechner himself considered the two works to be closely associated with one another. By citing *Elements*, Fechner added many psychophysical explanations in the notes of the second edition of *The Little Book*, which was published in 1866 (Fechner, 2005, pp. 80–81, 94).

The favourable reception of *The Little Book* in Japan

The Little Book has been translated into many languages. It is remarkable that there are five different Japanese translations. In the following section, we will examine the reason behind the wide acceptance of Fechner's view of life and death in *The Little Book* in Japan.

The first Japanese translation by M. Hirata was published in 1910, the second by K. Tamiya in 1916, the third by M. Ueda on 15 July 1948, the fourth by M. Sakuma on 30 July 1948 and the fifth by C. Hattori in 2008 (Fechner, 1910; 1916; 1948a; 1948b; 2008). Hirata,

Tamiya, Ueda and Sakuma translated the book from German; however, Hattori read only the English translated edition. Except Hattori, the other four translators wrote an introduction or an appendix in *The Little Book*. The following are descriptions of the translators' introduction followed by an examination of their similarities.

The first translator Hirata states,

It is the age of science today; in other words, it is an age where everything can be accomplished by science. [...] However, behind the control exerted by science and the material civilization, there hides a crucial defect, that is to say, a spiritual defect, a serious dissatisfaction, a fatal disharmony inside ourselves, a conflict between our emotion and will, or doubt about our spirit (Fechner, 1910, Introduction, pp. 1–2).

The second translator Tamiya mentions the following in his introduction:

It is an important matter whether science or mystic phenomena prevails. It is presently the age of science, when the force of science illuminates and controls everything, and I agree that we immensely benefit from science. Then, is it justified to accept mystic phenomena as nonsensical? (Fechner, 1916, p. 175).

It is worth noting that these two translators share a common notion: they fear that the abrupt influx of Western science and materialism might deprive the Japanese of their traditional spirituality.

During the Edo Era (1603–1868), a policy was enforced that prohibited contact with most foreign countries; this policy continued to be in force for more than 200 years from 1641 to 1853. The Meiji Restoration—which were a chain of events that led to extensive changes in Japan's cultural, political and social structure—occurred at the beginning of the Meiji Era (1868–1912). At that time, Western culture and Western concepts were flooding into Japan and people were urgently trying to understand and absorb them. Under those circumstances, the import of Western science and technology posed a challenge to the Japanese traditional culture. The first and second translations were published during this age.

Both the third and the fourth translations of *The Little Book* were published in 1948, more than 30 years after that of the first and the second ones, and a few years after Japan's defeat in the Second World War, when Communism and the materialism of Marxism was more widespread than that during 1910 in Japan. At that time, religious Japanese people were anxious about traditional religions being expelled by materialism. According to Kitagawa, a historian of religions, religion for the most part 'lacked leadership and resources to cope with the general apathy and disillusionment of the people', and the plight of the religious groups that had existed since before the war was 'further accentuated by the growing influence of Communism and the emergence of the so-called new religions' (Kitagawa, 1990, p. 282). White-collar workers in urban areas, educators, scientists, artists and university students, who tended to view the economic and political future of Japan with pessimism, 'rejected the traditional religions and cultural values' and instead founded a 'new certainty Communism', which was to them an 'immanent pseudo religion of materialism' (Kitagawa, 1990, p. 284).

The third translator, Ueda translated not only *The Little Book* but also *Die Tagesansicht gegenüber der Nachtansicht* [*The Day View as Contrasted with the Night View*], and these two works were merged into a single volume. By the term 'day view' as contrasted with 'night view', Fechner referred to the anti-materialistic view, that is, the view that the entire material universe is inwardly alive and consciously animated, instead of being dead. In his introduction to the volume, Ueda writes,

The fundamental thought of this book lies in the amalgamation of religion and science, which was Fechner's lifelong desire. Fechner develops his optimistic 'day view' rooted in everyday life aggressively and boldly, resisting 'night view' such as shallow materialism and insubstantial idealism. In this regard, I believe that Fechner's view will nourish the world of thought in Japan, because today the Japanese world of thought is covered with the cloud of the 'night view' again just as in Fechner's lifetime. (Fechner, 1948a, Introduction, p. 7).

The fourth translator, Sakuma writes that *The Little Book* seems to be poetic but at the same time is not so, because it lays more emphasis on empirical facts rich in scientific consideration, and it is not a book of the natural sciences, because it is too poetic and religious to be considered as a scientific work. Sakuma emphasises that it is a synthesis of poetry, religion and the natural sciences (Fechner, 1948b, p. 2).

From the above descriptions of the four translators, the reason behind the wide acceptance of *The Little Book* in Japan was because the Japanese people longed for a non-materialistic worldview that criticises scientific materialism based on scientific knowledge and is a synthesis of religion and the natural sciences.

However, even if *The Little Book* satisfies this need of the Japanese, it is still obscure as to why the Japanese people strongly favour the Christian-influenced book, for in Japan there have been far fewer Christians as compared to that in Western countries. The proportion of the Christian population is less than 1%.

It is known that the Japanese spiritual ethos was formed based on Shintoism and Buddhism more than hundreds of years ago, and it is still practiced among the Japanese people today. For this reason, most Japanese do not have an antipathy against the ideas of Shintoism or Buddhism, but they do not completely believe these ideas. An example of such ideas is a pantheistic one that *Kamis* (Japanese Gods) or Buddhas dwell in all things, in other words, the entire world can be considered as *Kamis* or Buddhas, which includes not only humans and animals but also mountains, rivers and trees. Another example of these ideas is a panpsychistic one that many animals and plants are sentient beings.

As already mentioned, Fechner's view in *The Little Book* consists of pantheistic and panpsychistic doctrines, therefore, it is likely that the Japanese people regard it as resembling the ideas of Japanese traditional culture, although it differs substantially from Japanese thought due to its adoption of Christian principles. We infer that this is another reason why Fechner's view of life and death was widely accepted in Japan.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the reasons behind the wide acceptance of Fechner's view of life and death in *The Little Book* in Japan. The two suggested reasons are as follows: (1) The Japanese people longed for a non-materialistic worldview that criticised scientific materialism and (2) Fechner's doctrines superficially resembled traditional Japanese spiritual thoughts.

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