Bolzano on Time and History

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The topics of time, history, historiography and historical method appear rather peripherally in Bolzano's writings; nevertheless, his views are not without interest. Partly they are uncommon, and partly he anticipates later philosophical ideas by decades. I will first briefly recall Bolzano's accounts of time and causation and will then sketch his critique of German idealist conceptions of historical laws. Bolzano's perhaps most interesting contribution in the field, his Bayesian account of historical credibility, can only be mentioned here (see Löffler 1997 for a closer analysis).

1. Bolzano on Time and Causation

His frequent mentioning of time notwithstanding, it appears as if Bolzano has not developed a fully unified and clear account of time (Morscher 1973, 69-75; Textor 2003a, 98-102, Textor 2003b). We may leave aside here some early texts where Bolzano regarded time as a relation (*Verhältnis*), holding presumably between two stages or states of object (and hence a form of attribute [*Beschaffenheit*]). In his subsequent writings, Bolzano turned to the view that time is not a *Beschaffenheit* at all, but a qualification (*Bestimmung*) of the object. According to Bolzano, a sentence expressing a contingent attribution like "Socrates is courageous" should rather be analysed involving a temporal adverbial qualification: "Socrates at *t* is courageous" (*Wissenschaftslehre*, § 79; see Textor 2003a, 99f; Textor 2003b). It is crucial to keep in mind that this index "at *t*" is a part of the subject-term of the sentence and not of the copula. Bolzano believes that sentences have a uniform structure on the level of their depth-grammar, and he uses the univocal, untensed copula "has" (*A* has *b*) for their analysis (Schnieder 2004, 80f). Time as qualification / *Bestimmung* makes it possible that contradictory properties can be predicated of one and the same object. However, at a closer look, it seems to commit Bolzano to a sort of perdurantism or phase-ontology: Socrates-at-t_1 cannot be the same as Socrates-at-t_2, if Bolzano's model is supposed to work. The purported object Socrates really consists of phases or stages, whereas the sentences describing the states of Socrates-at-t_n are timelessly true or timelessly false. How easy or difficult this is to reconcile with Bolzanos other views on the identity of objects, must be left open here (see Textor 2003b, 88f on Bolzano's wavering between perdurantism and endurantism). It should just be mentioned that one all-too-simple attempt at reconciliation will not be successful: One might perhaps recall that Bolzano in fact regards mesoscopic objects like human beings as bundles of simple substances (see, among others, the essay *Atomenlehre des seligen Bolzano* by his close disciple František Příhonský, edited in Příhonský 2003; Schnieder 2002, Runggaldier 2003), and that changes in the bundle might easily explain why Socrates-at-t_1 is not precisely the same as Socrates-at-t_2. However, this ontological phasing also affects the simple substances at the micro-level. Since substances constantly change, sentences about them would also refer to substances-at-t_n, that means to substance-phases. The problem might ultimately have to do with Bolzano's unclear account of qualification / *Bestimmung* and the unclear distinction between *Beschaffenheit* and *Bestimmung*. In any case, it is clear that Bolzano wants to hold the anti-Kantian position that time is "real" time and not just an idea or presentation of time, i.e. the *Bestimmung* / qualification of time is not an ingredient stemming from the cognising subject.

Bolzano's thought about causation displays a similar picture. As far as I can see, his own remarks are rather scattered and do not make up a detailed account, and there is no exhaustive treatment in the secondary literature so far (for valuable, but still partial clarifications see Morscher 1973, Neemann 1972, 1973 and 1984, Textor 1996 and Schnieder 2002). However, causation is a central concept for Bolzano. According to him, "being a real thing" and "being a cause" or "effecting something" is coextensive, yet not conceptually the same. The connection between reality and effecting is more clearly expressed in Bolzano's German terminology: being *wirklich* (real) is characterized by being *wirksam* or *wirkend* (effecting). According to Bolzano, everything that is real has some effects and vice versa. Interestingly, Bolzano regards the concept of a "real thing" as a primitive concept which admits of no further analysis or definition, whereas "being a cause" is definable in terms of reasons and reality (*Wissenschaftslehre*, § 168): "*a* is the cause of *b*" means "[that *a* is real] is the reason for [that *b* is real]". It is obvious that this definition would require a lot of clarification: For example, we notice that Bolzano, although he regards causality as a relation between objects, defines it in terms of reasons and consequences between propositions. We might further ask whether only substances are causes, or – as it frequently appears in Bolzano – whether also attributes or perhaps events may function as relata in the cause-relation (see Schnieder 2002). Be that as it may, it is important for our following consideration that Bolzano uses a conception of causation which is completely detached from the idea of nomic regularity or law-likeness. Bolzano distinguishes between *Abfolge* (approximately: [con]sequence) and *Ableitbarkeit* (deducibility), and in a similar sense between material consequence and formal consequence (*materiale* and *formale Abfolge*): whereas a causal relation corresponds to a material consequence, it is doubtful whether it must always correspond to a formal consequence in the sense of deducibility. Bolzano's conception of causality has more in common with an Aristotelian conception of effective cause as bringing-something-about, and the idea of law-like description has no significant place in it. Moreover, Bolzano emphasizes the distinction of partial and complete causes (Bolzano 1838[2], 74ff): that something is the case, is caused by the collaboration of a whole network of partial causes. A murder, for instance, only happens if the murderer, the victim, some tool or weapon etc. are given in an appropriate spatio-temporal nexus. The murderer alone cannot be labelled as "the cause" of the murder; he is only a *partial cause*. In many cases, it will be impossible for us to describe the complete cause exhaustively.

2. Laws of History?

The latter remarks lead us to Bolzano's view of historical causation and the plausibility of purported laws of historical succession. From Bolzano's point of view, talking about historical causation makes perfect sense, but we need not appeal to historical laws for it. One might see Bolzano as a distant forerunner of Karl Popper's critique of historicism. To keep matters separated: Bolzano's problem here is not

exactly the problem of determinism (in the sense of a predetermination of all events, a pre-stabilized harmony or whatever) at the ontological level. In fact, there are passages for and against determinism in the *Athanasia*, and in sum Bolzano leaves the problem open, as far as I can see (on Bolzano and determinism see Neemann 1972). Bolzano's concern rather seems to be an epistemological one, whether we would be in a position to describe and perhaps forecast historical developments in a law-like style at all. My formulation "rather seems to be" is deliberately cautious here, since Bolzano's own statements on the matter are not direct. The most detailed investigation in the literature so far is by Ursula Neemann (1972, 1973). Neemann's argument can be summarized as follows: since Bolzanian substances are spatio-temporally unique objects, since general concepts according to Bolzano must always apply to at least two objects, and since any law-like description or explanation of changes must involve general concepts, there cannot be a full law-like description of the changes in a particular substance. The individual process of change will always, objectively and in principle be beyond the reach of our conceptual description. However, the prospects for law-like description or forecast increase if we abstract from concrete objects and constrain ourselves to general features (as it happens in the natural sciences). The problem with Neemann's considerations is that, although quite plausible, they are mostly conjectural in nature. The evidence which is offered for her claims from Bolzano's writings is rather thin and mostly stems from his doctrines of presentations (*Vorstellungen*) in the chapter "Elementarlehre" of his *Wissenschaftslehre*. A detailed treatment of the issue is still to be desired.

As a small step towards that, I will have a look at the text where Bolzano addresses the issue of historical laws of succession most directly. It is his posthumously published essay *On Hegel's and his Adherents' Concept of History in General and especially of the History of Philosophy*. Bolzano wrote this essay around 1838, at a time when he had long been removed from his chair at Prague. Bolzano dwelled as a rather powerless private scholar in Bohemia, and, together with his disciples, he desperately tried to get more influence on the German intellectual life, partly by correspondence, partly by publications and book-reviews. The essay was most probably meant for a journal which should be founded for this task, and this explains the style and composition of the text. It is obviously designed for a broader audience. Its style comprises gentle polemic against philosophers of his time (sometimes close to the edge of sarcasm), and it clearly displays Bolzano's fine feeling for humour. Unlike most of Bolzano's scholarly texts, it contains no divisions or headlines, and at first glimpse it may appear as just a sloppy series of remarks. Nevertheless, the text is clearly argumentative, and it is not without an overall structure. Bolzano first lists up eight theses which he attributes to Hegelian philosophy of history, especially in the thought of Hegel's pupil August Cieszkowski (*Prolegomena zur Historiosophie*, 1838). He then addresses them with various defeating arguments. Since there is no logical pattern in the order of these arguments, I will re arrange them in the order of Bolzano's initial list. The respective Hegelian theses (summarized from Bolzano's presentation) are placed in front in *italics*.

a. The history of mankind is the history of the Weltgeist, *which develops towards its perfection in self-consciousness*. – Bolzano replies to this principal thesis by pointing out several unwarranted claims behind it: (aa) Why should self-consciousness have to do with perfection? (bb) How could the unique *Weltgeist* develop self-consciousness in a *multiplicity* of individuals? (cc) How exactly is the development to be understood? Bolzano recalls the Hegelian answer that in the course of history the very idea of mankind is subsequently realized in all forms in which it can be realized. But, Bolzano replies, this is not only counter-intuitive (must a scholar on his way to perfection really write all possible books, even bad ones?). As a description of a law, it is also insufficient: in order to describe a single historical law and not a multiplicity of them, one would also have to determine *the order* in which these realizations are gone through. Without this, the Hegelian "law" covers an huge variety of historical developments. (dd) The perhaps most important argument has to do with Bolzano's view of causality described above: we are part of an immense causal network, and the non-human substances in the world influence our lives in various ways. It is to be expected that purported regularities in the development of the *Weltgeist* would be massively disturbed. All in all, Bolzano holds, theism has at least the same explanatory and predictive power as Hegelian pantheism, but it does not share its implausibility.

b. Every state of mankind is a consequence of all previous ones, and it is a progress in the rational and necessary course of the Weltgeist. – Bolzano first points out a similarity to his own thought: all substances develop constantly, the sum of their presentations increases. In that sense, the whole mankind also increases in cognition. But in order to keep his position empirically plausible, Bolzano admits, contrary to the Hegelians, that not every single aspect of development must be regarded as progressive (think of sleeping persons or persons falling into paranoia). Because of the manifold causal connections and contingencies in the course of the world, we cannot simply regard one state as a consequence of all previous ones, and there can well be "local" regressions and setbacks in the overall process of development. In order to secure his thesis of an overall process, Bolzano has to invoke two external premises: increasing cognition will foster an increase in other perfections as well, and God will realize every good at some time.

c. The history of philosophy is its own development, and every philosophical system is a perfection of its immediate precursor which is appropriate for its time. – Bolzano replies that this is flatly implausible from a historical point of view. Thinkers do not always study the earlier systems exhaustively, and in many cases they even have their most original ideas before they get into touch with other systems. Moreover, philosophical biographies are influenced by manifold contingencies, especially education, temperament, health and illness, professional state, experiences of fate, etc. The same holds for the history of science, where important discoveries frequently go back to accident and luck. This does not exclude, says Bolzano, that there are some "weaker" regularities: Newton's theory, e.g., was so powerful that subsequent discoveries were almost to be expected. These ideas might sound astonishingly modern, and the same holds for Bolzano's account of scientific mistakes or dead ends. According to Bolzano, such phenomena happen, but – in opposition to the Hegelian view – they are neither necessary nor dramatic. Especially, one should stay away from two Hegelian strategies of explanation: false claims should neither be declared as "inessential to a system" or as "truths which are overcome (*aufgehoben*) in later systems". The former strategy would, at closer look, yield only true systems (a highly implausible consequence!). Against this, Bolzano (in an almost Popperian view of philosophy as problem-solving) holds that every thesis

which answers a question or which serves as a necessary premise for an answer is essential to a system, and a system which contains at least one false sentence is erroneous. The Hegelian concepts of "overcoming" and "higher truths" are criticized as obfuscations of a traditional and reasonable concept of "truth" and "falsity", and solid contradictions should, according to Bolzano, not be camouflaged as "perspective truths". In an almost Popperian wording, Bolzano regards philosophical systems as sets of fallible sentences, to which no rational person would assign absolute certainty. (This view of philosophical systems as sets of sentences is very similar to his view of sciences and religions in his *Wissenschaftslehre* and his *Lehrbuch der Religionswissenschaft*.) Of course there is a certain probability that later systems are all in all better, but there might also be "setbacks in knowledge" (296), in that a later system might replace one error by a whole web of errors; it is hard not to be reminded of Poppers idea of verisimilitude by these remarks. Public applause might be an indication of the quality of a system, but sometimes it can also be misguiding: political influence, the reputation of schools and chairs, personal fascination and an appearance of affinity to the empirical sciences may make systems fashionable which are in fact a massive fallback.

d. Every philosophical system is perfect for its age. – Bolzano does not address this thesis in much detail; in a postscript to the essay, he reminds us that it is not even clearly explicable what "the philosophy of a time" should mean. Again, we see that Bolzano does not take the history of philosophy as a sequence of big geniuses, but that he has a clear look to the manifoldness of actual philosophical attempts. (We might, however, at this point mention that Bolzano shares one important premise with the Hegelians, which separates him from most of today's analytic philosophy. He perceives philosophy very much in the category of full-blown philosophical *systems*. Bolzano himself is perhaps one of the most coherent system-building philosophers of all times, and it is obvious from the last sentence of his essay that he wants to promote his own system as an alternative to the idealist ones.)

e. The history of philosophy can be described as a sequence of three epochs following the law of dialectics. – Bolzano replies that this is highly implausible from a historical point of view. Such general descriptions always go back to a highly selective perception of historical developments and their distorted description on the Procrustean bed of a certain a priori theory. Nevertheless, Bolzano admits that there can be psychological forms of dialectics also in philosophy: sometimes, an erroneous position calls forth an overdone reaction, and this may foster the search for a moderate, balanced middle-position. However, such dialectics are neither startling nor important in their scope.

f. The history of mankind as a whole follows this same law. – The same criticism as before applies also here, but Bolzano also puts in question the very law of dialectics from several sides. "Dialectical contradictions" are really *diversities* of various kinds which can be found everywhere in the world (e.g., a plant is no "contradiction" to its germ!), and the concept of overcoming (*Aufhebung*) is completely obscure. Hence, from such an undetermined law, even if it were true, nothing follows. Moreover, there is a conceptual gap: even if there were something like a dialectical movement, this would not, without further premises, imply that it is also a movement of progress or an increase in perfection. Historical "explanations" by the triadic dialectical law, hence, are pseudo-explanations; this does of course not prevent that, psychologically, some developments at a minor scale can be explained by psychological dialectics of actions, overreactions and compromise.

g. Every nation represents the world history of a certain stage; every nation plays a welthistorisch *rôle exactly once, and the "great" figures of history represent their nations and their times.* – Bolzano sees these claims as wholly unwarranted (Why should nations and not individual persons represent the Weltgeist? Why should nations never get a "second historical chance"?) and a source of uncontrollable historical associations. The third thesis, moreover, contains some massive contradictions and confusions: "greatness" should not be confused with historical success or causing visible changes. Success depends on a host of historical contingencies, luck and chance, and in some cases the real historical greatness might consist in refraining from unrealistic attempts at all. A purported representation-relation between great figures and their nations or epochs is obscure at closer look: great persons are great just because they differ from the average, because they are *not* typical examples. So on what features should the representation relation be based?

h. Contemporary philosophy (in the Hegelian style) is a climax, but it is bound to succumb first into applied philosophy and then into shallow popularisation. – Bolzano reads this as a tacit confession that a clear and unpretentious account of Hegelianism is still to be desired. But since clarity and well-defined modes of speech were declared as methodological vices by the Hegelians, the prospects for such an account are bad. Bolzano also points out some contradictions in the climax-thesis: for example, the Hegelian lamentation about the disdain of reason by a good part of the intellectual audience cannot easily be reconciled with it.

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