

Mauthner, Fritz

b. 22 November 1849, Ho_ice, Austria-Hungary (Bohemia)

d. 29 June 1923, Meersburg, Germany

Life and Work

Mauthner has become famous for his three-volume Contributions to a Critique of Language and a three-volume Dictionary of Philosophy, published as “new contributions to a critique of language”. In these works he showed fundamental scepticism regarding the possibilities of language to give an adequate description of the world of objects, states of affairs, concepts etc. Our language is in some sense defective: when we look at the world, our senses just pick up images, sounds etc. by accident (zufällig). These sense-data are linked to words in social settings in which people communicate these impressions to each other (related of course to our memories concerning our experiences). This communication, according to Mauthner, generates a collective memory of sense experiences and linguistic utterances covering these sensations. Because experience is central to Mauthner’s linguistic views, the linguistic form which most adequately represents the world of the senses is the adjectival -- he distinguishes an adjectival, verbal and substantival world view to be found in the elementary word forms: adjective, verb and substantive. There are no substantial entities which underlie words but only sensed experiences of a rather accidental kind. Words ultimately represent characteristics (adjectives) we experience like red, warm, light, heavy etc. But according to the accidental character of our senses no truth can be inferred from them. What Mauthner rejects is the so-called “word-superstition” (Wortaberglaube) of Western philosophy. Reality cannot

be known by language and therefore a substantial world view, which presupposes real entities which can be labelled by substantives, is vehemently attacked in his critique. Cultural and linguistic developments have made words into abstract concepts without any reference to reality and even if there were a "reality", words are inadequate to describe it. The reason for this is that the sensitive, subjective, dimension of words has gradually disappeared in the course of history. The communicative value of these abstract concepts in situations in which they are used does not exist any longer. He therefore criticizes the efforts of linguists and philosophers to create an ideal language which unambiguously covers all possible realities. Language use (ordinary language) continually transcends the formal boundaries of ideal languages.

Mauthner's scepticism regarding language has its roots in the unbridgeable gap between language, thought and reality. His later propagation of silence is the ultimate result of his critique of language: nothing really true can be said about the world although we subjectively feel that what we said about it is true. This is his godless mysticism (gottlose Mystik) rejecting god as a meaningless abstract concept and turning to the inner experience of what seems to be true.

Major Works

(1906-1913) Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache, Leipzig: Meiner (3 vols.; repr. of the 3rd ed. 1969, Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung).

(1910-1911) Wörterbuch der Philosophie. Neue Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache, München, Leipzig: G. Müller (2 vols.; 2nd ed. 1923-1924; repr. of the 2nd ed. In 3 vols. 1997, Wien etc.: Böhlau.

Further Reading

Arens, K. (1984), Functionalism and Fin de siècle: Fritz Mauthner's Critique of Language, New York etc.: Lang.

Jacobs, M. (1925), Die drei Bilder der Welt. Ein sprachkritischer Versuch (aus dem Nachlaß F. Mauthners herausgegeben), Erlangen: Verlag der philosophischen Akademie.

Kühn, J. (1975), Gescheiterte Sprachkritik: Fritz Mauthners Leben und Werk, Berlin, New York: De Gruyter.

Kurzreiter, Martin (1993), Sprachkritik als Ideologiekritik bei Fritz Mauthner, Frankfurt/M. etc.: Lang.

Leinfellner, E., H. Schleichert (1995), Fritz Mauthner. Das Werk eines kritischen Denkers, Wien etc.: Böhlau.

Weiler, G. (1986), Mauthner's Critique of Language, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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