

FORUM LIGHTER SIDE

Two travellers were chatting on a train in the middle of 19th-century Germany, and one remarked that he was from Leipzig, to which, unprompted, the other said, 'That is the home of the greatest German humourist, Gustav Theodor Fechner'. The man from Leipzig chuckled inwardly, for it was Fechner himself.

For most undergraduates, Fechner, if known at all, is the dry old stick whose incomprehensible law begins the aridities of psychophysics. Fechner had, though, a double life. While still a reluctant medical student, his alter ego, 'Dr Mises', wrote humorous, satirical articles, many still in print, that pricked at the pomposities of German doctors and many other targets.

Humour famously doesn't translate, be it across time (Dr Mises wrote almost two centuries ago), across space (from Germany to England), or across languages (and even committed Freudians admit *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* fails terribly in translation, its laborious puns painstakingly spelled out until the wit is moribund and the humour suicidal).

Fechner's early, satirical humour is often science-based, with Pythonesque flights of fantasy reminiscent of *Private Eye*. The *Proof that the Moon is made of Iodine*, published in 1821, when Fechner was but 20, attacked those credulous doctors who uncritically promoted iodine, discovered merely a decade earlier, as a cure for all ills. In 1832, with cholera raging across Europe, the *Defensive Measures for Cholera*, was not about protecting people from cholera, but about protecting cholera from people. Written for a more leisurely age, the joke perhaps was overextended at 164 pages.

Eccentric humour is on a line beginning with wit, moving through strangeness, weirdness, and finally reaching psychosis. *The Comparative Anatomy of Angels*, written with biological wit and insight, considering angels' bodily shape (spherical) and how they talk (by light), was but eccentric. However *The Little Book of Life after Death* was further along the line, with no humour but much panpsychism, the sun, moon and planets having a collective unconscious into which we all one day merge. Of *The Soul Life of Plants*, perhaps little should be said. Fechner's theological journey from son of the manse, through medical student atheist, to thoroughgoing panpsychism, puts a different face on psychophysics, incorporating the psychical as much as the psychological.

Fechner's image, made worse by those dreadful photographs, is the archetypically desiccated Teutonic professor. However like all professors, he was young once, and he also had fun. Always a scholar, with 'no aptitude for anything except to hold a pen and a book', his life, 'taking place mainly at my desk', was much more than just psychophysics (and he did influence William James, Freud and Wittgenstein). That great historian of psychology, unfortunately named Boring, described the sedentary Fechner, 'faring forth on his many and varied adventures of the mind'. And as psychophysics has somehow never managed, those mental adventures made people laugh.



Humour doesn't travel well?