

A Letter from Edmund Husserl to Franz Brentano from 29 XII 1889

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Abstract Among the correspondence between Husserl and Brentano kept at the Houghton Library of Harvard University there is a letter from Husserl to Brentano from 29 XII 1889, whose contents were completely unknown until now. The letter is of some significance, both historically as well as systematically for Husserl's early development, painting a vivid picture of his relation and indebtedness to his teacher Franz Brentano. As in his letter to Stumpf from February 1890, Husserl describes the issues he had encountered during the elaboration of his habilitation work into the *Philosophy of Arithmetic*, but also announces that he has finally found “clarity” regarding the *arithmetica universalis*.

Among the correspondence between Husserl and Brentano kept at the Houghton Library of Harvard University there is a letter from Husserl to Brentano from 29 XII 1889,¹ which is not mentioned in the *Husserl-Chronik* and has not been included in Husserl's *Briefwechsel* (possibly due to the fact that it bears the same date, but a different year, as the preceding letter from 29 XII 1886). While the letter is clearly reported with its complete date in the guide to Brentano's correspondence of the Houghton Library,² until now its contents were completely unknown.

The letter is of some significance, both historically as well as systematically for Husserl's early development. Given the lengths to which Husserl goes in praising and thanking Brentano, his works, and his lectures (by current standards bordering

¹ Franz Clemens Brentano Correspondence, 1867–1917 (MS Ger 202). Houghton Library, Harvard University. Husserl's letter to Brentano from 29 XII 1889 is number 2074.

² The digital guide to Brentano's correspondence is available on-line: <http://oasis.lib.harvard.edu/oasis/deliver/~hou00574>.

on shameless flattery), it is clear that the intellectual and career debt to his “hochverehrter Lehrer” at the time must have been enormous. While this might be understandable in a letter to his teacher (and his teacher’s teacher) from a young scholar who had just completed his habilitation, Husserl’s exuberant thankfulness did not rapidly fade. It was still in evidence on Easter 1907 when, after their encounter in March, Brentano writes to his brother Lujo that Husserl was “überschwänglich in Äußerungen seiner Dankbarkeit” (“gushing in his expressions of gratitude”).³

In a certain sense, this tells us nothing new, since Husserl’s indebtedness to Brentano (and Stumpf) has been noted repeatedly not only in the secondary literature, but also by Husserl himself, from the CV he wrote for his habilitation in Halle (“*ab a. 1884 me totum abdidit in studia philosopha duce Francisco Brentano*”, Gerlach and Sepp 1994, p. 165; Schuhmann 1977, p. 13), to his reminiscences of Brentano for Kraus’s volume (“In a time of growing philosophical interests, and of wavering about whether I should stick with mathematics for life or dedicate myself completely to philosophy, Brentano’s lectures gave the breakthrough”; Husserl 1919, p. 153; Hua XXV, pp. 304 f.). Nevertheless, the expressions that Husserl chooses in this letter to Brentano himself to characterize this period of studies—e.g., the image of “sitting at your feet”, the quote from Goethe’s *Faust* about having “suckled at your sphere” (“*an Ihrer Sphäre lang gesogen*”), the expression of his “unchanged and unchangeable reverence” etc.—certainly paint a more vivid picture than his reminiscences thirty years later.

Here, however, in the context of the beginnings of Husserl’s philosophy, he points to a very specific and perhaps somewhat surprising influence: that Brentano’s lectures from the WS 1885/86 (i.e., those on *Praktische Philosophie* and *Ausgewählte Fragen aus der Psychologie und Ästhetik*), rather than those on logic, were an “essential inspiration” during the elaboration of his habilitation thesis into the *Philosophy of Arithmetic*. One of the “essential inspirations” Husserl might refer to here could be the theory of “*uneigentliche Vorstellungen*”, improper or inauthentic presentations, which was discussed at some length not only in Brentano’s logic lectures, but also in those on psychology and aesthetics when dealing with fantasy presentations and intuitive and non-intuitive presentations.⁴ Indeed, this is one of the few concepts Husserl very explicitly thanks Brentano for in the *Philosophie der Arithmetik* (Husserl 1891, p. 215; Hua XII, pp. 193/205). It is hard to overstate the importance of Brentano’s lectures for the development of Husserl’s early position and a correct understanding of his early works in the context of the Brentanist philosophy of mathematics current in the School at the time (Ierna 2012, 2014).

In the letter to Stumpf from February 1890, Husserl describes the issues he had encountered during the elaboration of his habilitation work into the *Philosophy of Arithmetic* as follows:

³ Letter from Franz Brentano to Lujo Brentano from Easter Sunday (30 March) 1907, number 3214 in Brentano’s correspondence (MS Ger 202) at the Houghton Library.

⁴ See Franz Clemens Brentano Compositions, 1870–1917 (MS Ger 230). Houghton Library, Harvard University, manuscript PS 78 *Ausgewählte Fragen aus Psychologie und Aesthetik. Kolleg 1885/1886*, esp. 59601 ff. and 59619 ff.

The opinion [...] that the concept of amount would constitute the foundation of general arithmetic soon proved itself wrong. (Already the analysis of the ordinal number led me to this.) Through no kind of trick, no “improper presenting,” can the negative, rational, irrational and the manifoldly complex numbers be derived from the concept of amount. (HuaDok III, p. 158)

The newly discovered letter to Brentano from two months earlier confirms and reinforces these points:

I had great difficulties with the full understanding of the logical character of the system of signs of the *arithmetica universalis*, with its negative and imaginary, rational and irrational numbers. The matter is not so simple that everything could be completely settled with the concept of amount and the theory of improper presenting.

Husserl also tells Brentano that he expects his newfound understanding of general arithmetic to aid him in resolving his difficulties with the foundations of geometry and the theory of the continuum. In this context, he then mentions the work he had begun on the problem of the continuum while still under Brentano’s tutelage in Vienna. The manuscript Husserl seems to be referring to here is probably “Homogene und Inhomogene Continua”, dated June 28, 1886.⁵ Indeed, Husserl originally meant to use this work for his habilitation, as we learn from Brentano’s remark to Stumpf that Husserl is working on “a treatise about the problem of continuity. [...] With it he would like to obtain habilitation in philosophy” (Schuhmann 1977, p. 17; Ierna 2005, p. 7). Soon thereafter, however, Husserl started focusing more on “logical investigations regarding the basic concepts and principles of arithmetic and higher analysis”, as he tells Brentano in his previous letter of 1886 (HuaDok III, p. 5). Now, three years later, he has found “clarity” in these matters (i.e., regarding the *arithmetica universalis*) and is ready to tackle the problems of the continuum again. Husserl wanted to include these topics—i.e., general arithmetic and the applications of the arithmetical algorithm in other domains—in the planned second volume of the *Philosophy of Arithmetic*.

Also Husserl’s remarks on his “ambition to see my name in print as soon and as often as possible” merit consideration. The 1891 *Philosophy of Arithmetic* would actually be his first published book,⁶ since the first chapter of his habilitation work, which he had prepared for print separately, had not been commercially distributed (Husserl 1891a, p. IX) and served only to fulfil the requirements of the combined habilitation and nostrification at the University of Halle.⁷ Husserl wants to “only

⁵ Manuscript K I 50/47 in the Husserl-Archives Leuven; also see Schuhmann (1977, p. 16). A picture of the first page of the manuscript (with title and date) can be found in Sepp (1988, p. 157). The surrounding pages in the manuscript contain excerpts and critical discussions of Riemann and Helmholtz, which also were the topic of Husserl’s early lectures at Halle.

⁶ Not his first publication, as it is preceded at least by his article on “Der Folgerungscalcul und die Inhaltslogik” (Husserl 1891a) and possibly by his “Rezension von E. Schröder, Vorlesungen über die Algebra der Logik” (Husserl 1891b).

⁷ Husserl’s *Habilitationsschrift* was never published as such. The work that has been published in Hua XII as “Über den Begriff der Zahl” is in fact just the first chapter of the *Habilitationsschrift*, as Husserl himself very clearly states in his last footnote to the work. For a more extensive discussion of these matters and an attempt at a reconstruction of the lost parts of the habilitation work, see Ierna (2005).

publish what I deem really useful”, and he takes particular care if the work “is to be adorned with your name, my revered teacher”. When Brentano received the *Philosophie der Arithmetik* around May 1891, he did show great appreciation for Husserl’s dedication: “Daß Sie mir dieses Erstlingswerk größeren Umfangs widmen, ist ein rührender Beweis von Dankbarkeit, die ich von Seiten eines Schülers der jüngeren österreichischen Periode kaum ähnlich erfahren habe” (HuaDok III, p. 6).⁸

Halle, 29.XII.1889.

Hochverehrter Herr Professor!

Zum neuen Jahr meine innigsten Wünsche für Ihr Glück und Wohlergehen, so wie das Ihrer Lieben! Und beste Wünsche für das Gedeihen und die Vollendung der großen Schöpfung, an welcher die Kraft Ihres Geistes seit Jahren wirkt und von welcher die wahre, wissenschaftliche Philosophie so mächtige Förderung, ja ihre rechte und dauernde Fundierung zu gewärtigen hat. Es war mir eine unaussprechliche Freude in Ihrer neuen Schrift das Werk in nahe Aussicht gestellt zu finden, und dies, um aufrichtig zu sein, nicht bloß wegen der erwarteten Förderung unserer Wissenschaft, sondern nicht minder wegen der frohen Hoffnung, in meiner eigenen Erkenntnis wesentlich gefördert zu werden. So werde ich wieder das hohe Glück empfinden, das ich so dankbar genoss, da ich noch zu Ihren Füßen saß: geklärt zu werden durch Ihre Klarheit; teilzunehmen an den Gedanken, Entwürfen und Erfolgen Ihres immer weiter dringenden Geistes.

Solches reine Glück gewährte mir auch die Lektüre Ihrer letzten Schrift “Vom Ursprung sittlicher Erkenntnis”; die grundlegenden Gedanken zur Ethik, die der Vortrag selbst enthält, waren mir aus Ihren Vorlesungen bekannt; und doch, welch ein Genuss für mich, diese bedeutsamen, ja Epoche machenden Gedanken in knapper, scharfer und wahrhaft vollendeter Form von Neuem zu empfangen! Dann die Anmerkungen. So mancher Jurist mochte sie leicht missen, manchem Philosophen mochten sie fatal sein. (Ich meine hier natürlich die größeren, die Logik betreffenden Zusätze.) Mich erfüllten sie, wegen der großartigen dialektischen Kraft, der höchsten kritischen Schärfe, der sorghaften Klarheit und des vornehmen Tones mit aufrichtiger Bewunderung.

Sie haben mir durch die Übersendung dieser Schrift eine große Freude bereitet. Vom Herzen Dank hierfür. Es hat mir wohlgetan, dass Sie meiner so freundlich gedenken. Dass ich den lebhaft empfundenen Dank erst heute ausspreche, werden Sie mir gewiss verzeihen, wenn Sie hören, dass ich mich im letzten Jahr, vorzugsweise im Sommer, sehr schlecht befand. Ich war so nervenleidend, dass ich zu Nichts taugte und kaum die notdürftigste Vorbereitung für meine Vorlesungen leisten konnte. In den Ferien war ich im Hochgebirge (Tweng, in den Radstädter Tauern), wo ich mich

⁸ I would like to thank Robin Rollinger and Thomas Vongehr for their assistance with the translation and edition of the letter and Steven Crowell for his helpful comments and corrections. The discovery was made during my stay as Visiting Fellow in Philosophy at Harvard University, which was enabled by my NWO VENI grant, nr. 275-20-036.

allmählich erholte. Die schweren physischen Begleiterscheinungen, als Migräne, Schwächezustände etc., verloren sich und wesentlich gekräftigt kehrte ich zurück. In den letzten beiden Monaten ist mein Befinden sich steigernd ein gutes und ich fühle mich nun ganz gesund.

Mit frischen Kräften habe ich mich wiederum den philosophischen Untersuchungen zur Philosophie der Mathematik zugewendet, die ich bereits in Wien begonnen hatte, freilich ohne mir damals auch nur entfernt über die Schwierigkeit des Unternehmens klar zu sein. Der Himmel wird es mir, so hoffe ich, vergönnen, das Werk in diesem Winter zu vollenden und damit eine tatsächliche und empfindliche Lücke der Wissenschaft auszufüllen. Dass ich mich so gut wie gar nicht auf brauchbare Voruntersuchungen stützen konnte (von einigen wesentlichen Anregungen in Ihren Vorlesungen des WS 1885/86 abgesehen), ist wohl der Hauptgrund dafür, dass ich nur mühsam und langsam vorwärtskomme. Große Schwierigkeiten machte mir das volle Verständnis des logischen Charakters des Zeichensystems der arithmetica universalis mit ihren negativen und imaginären, rationalen und irrationalen Zahlen. Die Sache ist nicht so einfach, dass mit dem Anzahlbegriff und der Lehre vom uneigentlichen Vorstellen alles getan wäre.

Momentan bin ich dabei, meine ersten Versuche aus dem Jahr 1886, die Grundlagen der Geometrie und überhaupt die allgemeine Kontinuitätslehre betreffend, von Neuem zu durchdenken. Ich blieb damals stecken, weil es mir an dem wahren Verständnis der allgemeinen Arithmetik gebrach; nun ich in dieser zur Klarheit gelangt bin, hoffe ich auch in der Kontinuitätslehre den letzten Rest von Unklarheit zu bemeistern.

Ich habe durch mein bisheriges Verhalten bewiesen, dass mich der Ehrgeiz, meinen Namen möglichst bald und oft gedruckt zu sehen, nicht zu voreiligen Publikationen treibt. Ihres Beifalls bin ich hier sicher. Ich werde nur veröffentlichen, was ich für wirklich nützlich halte, sei es nach der positiven oder kritischen Seite. Selbstkritik ist freilich eine schwere Sache. Hoffentlich wird sie mich gerade bei diesem Werke, das mit Ihrem Namen, mein hochverehrter Lehrer, geziert sein soll, nicht allzusehr täuschen. Nun, ich rede schon, als läge das Buch ganz oder nahezu fertig vor mir—und ist doch noch so viel daran zu schaffen und zu gestalten. Doch ich will nicht verzagen. Ich denke: nicht umsonst habe ich “an Ihrer Sphäre lang gesogen” – Der Abgang Stumpfs hat mich ganz unvorbereitet getroffen. Ich verliere an ihm einen verehrten, gütigen und wohlwollenden Freund und das empfinde ich schmerzlich. Sein Nachfolger dürfte wohl Erdmann werden. Bin neugierig, wie sich mein Verhältnis zu ihm gestalten wird, nachdem ich seine große Schrift über die Axiome der Geometrie (1877) ganz ablehne.

Doch nun ist es Zeit zu schließen. Ergebene Empfehlungen bitte ich Sie an Ihre Frau Gemahlin zu übermitteln. Es war mir eine große Freude durch Frau Löning zu hören, dass sie meiner noch in so freundlicher Art gedenkt. Herzliche Grüße und allerbeste Neujahrswünsche auch an Herrn Prof. Marty, der, wie sonst zu dieser Zeit, auch diesmal bei Ihnen weilen dürfte.

Ihnen selbst, mein hochverehrter Lehrer, den erneuten Ausdruck meiner allzeit unveränderten und unveränderlichen Verehrung, Liebe und Dankbarkeit von Ihrem

Edmund Husserl

Halle 29.XII.1889.

Dear Professor!

My most heartfelt wishes for your happiness and health in the new year, as well as for that of your dear ones! And my best wishes for the flourishing and completion of the great creation to which you have devoted your mental powers for years and from which the true, scientific philosophy can expect such mighty advancement, indeed its correct and lasting foundation. It was for me an inexpressible joy to find in your new treatise the prospects for your work [on Descriptive Psychology] so close,⁹ and to be honest, not only for the expected advancement of our science, but no less for the joyful hope of an essential advance in my own knowledge. Thus I will again feel the great happiness that I so gratefully enjoyed when I was still sitting at your feet: [the happiness] of being enlightened by your clarity, of sharing in the thoughts, projects, and successes of your ever-penetrating mind.

Such pure happiness was also granted me in reading your latest treatise “On the Origin of Moral Knowledge”.¹⁰ The foundational thoughts on ethics, contained in the public address itself, were already known to me through your lecture courses.¹¹ Nevertheless, what a pleasure for me to receive once again these significant, indeed epoch-making, thoughts in concise, sharp, and truly perfected form! Then [there are] the comments. Quite a few students and specialists in law might do without them, while they might prove fatal to some philosophers. (Of course here I mean the longer additions concerning logic). Their magnificent dialectical force, highest critical acuity, extremely careful clarity, and refined tone, filled me with sincere admiration.

By sending me this treatise you have given me great joy. My heartfelt thanks for this. You did me a great service in remembering me so kindly. You will certainly forgive me for expressing my vividly felt gratitude only today once you hear that in the past year, particularly in the summer, I have been doing very poorly. I suffered so much from nervousness that I was not fit for anything and was barely able to prepare my lecture courses. I spent the holidays in the mountains (Tweng, in the Radstädter Tauern), where I gradually recovered. The heavy physical symptoms, such as migraine, weakness etc., diminished, and I returned significantly invigorated. For the past two months my constitution has improved and I now feel completely healthy.

⁹ In the preface to his treatise *On the Origin of Moral Knowledge* Brentano had written: “These thoughts form a fragment of a Descriptive Psychology, which, as I now venture to hope, I may be enabled in the near future to publish in its complete form” (Brentano 1889, p. VI, translation from Brentano 1902, p. VIII).

¹⁰ Brentano (1889). In Husserl’s library at the Husserl-Archives Leuven with signature BQ 65.

¹¹ The lectures on *Praktische Philosophie* from the WS 1884/85 and WS 1885/86. Eduard Leisching’s notes of these lectures are kept at the Husserl-Archives Leuven with signature Y 4 and Y 5. Also see Franz Clemens Brentano Compositions, 1870–1917 (MS Ger 230). Houghton Library, Harvard University, manuscript Eth 21.

With renewed energy I have taken up again the philosophical investigations regarding the philosophy of mathematics which I had already begun in Vienna, but at that time without even the slightest awareness of the difficulty of the enterprise. Heaven will hopefully allow me to complete the work this winter and hence fill a real and perceptible gap in science. The fact that I was almost entirely unable to build on any useful preparatory research (with the exception of some essential inspirations from your lecture courses in the WS 1885/1886) is probably the main reason that I made progress only laboriously and slowly. I had great difficulties with the full understanding of the logical character of the system of signs of the *arithmetica universalis* with its negative and imaginary, rational and irrational numbers. The matter is not so simple that everything could be completely settled with the concept of amount and the theory of improper presenting.

Currently I am rethinking my first attempts from the year 1886 regarding the foundations of geometry and the general theory of the continuum. At that time I got stuck because I lacked a true understanding of general arithmetic; now that I have gained clarity in these matters I also hope to overcome the last trace of unclarity regarding the theory of the continuum.

My behavior to this point has demonstrated that the ambition to see my name in print as quickly and as often as possible has not driven me to premature publications. I am certain of your approval in this matter. I will only publish what I deem really useful, whether of a positive or a critical character. Self-criticism is certainly a difficult matter. Hopefully it will not deceive me too much in the very work that is to be adorned with your name, my revered teacher.¹² Well now, I am speaking as though the book already lay wholly or nearly finished before me—and yet there still is so much to create and shape. But I will not despair. I think: not for nothing have I “long suckled at your sphere”¹³—The departure of Stumpf caught me completely off-guard.¹⁴ In him I lose a revered, kind, and benevolent friend, and this pains me. His successor will probably be Erdmann.¹⁵ I’m curious to see how our relationship will develop, after I completely rejected his major work on the axioms of geometry (1877).¹⁶

But now it is time to come to a close. Please convey my very best regards to your wife. It was a great pleasure for me to hear through Mrs. Löning¹⁷ that she still

¹² The *Philosophie der Arithmetik* was dedicated to “Meinem Lehrer Franz Brentano in inniger Dankbarkeit” (“To my teacher Franz Brentano with heartfelt gratitude”).

¹³ A reference to Goethe’s *Faust*, specifically to the dialog where the *Erdgeist*, the earthly spirit, speaks to Faust: “*Du hast mich mächtig angezogen, an meiner Sphäre lang gesogen*”.

¹⁴ Carl Stumpf, who had supervised Husserl’s habilitation in Halle, transferred to the University of Munich in 1889.

¹⁵ Benno Erdmann (1851–1921), professor in Halle from 1890 to 1898.

¹⁶ Erdmann (1877). In Husserl’s library with signature BQ 126.

¹⁷ According to a letter from Malvine Husserl to Elli Rosenberg from 26 February 1933: “Frau Loening, eine Pflegetochter der Gräfin Wersowetz (die bei Loenings in Halle lebte u. mit der ich auch viel verkehrte), ist mir in sehr lieber Erinnerung, eine schöne anmutige Frau, etwa 7 Jahre älter als ich, die ich sehr anschwärmte u. die mir auch sehr zugethan war.” Schuhmann (1988, p. 122) also points out that Prof. Edgar Loening (1843–1919) had been a friend of Husserl’s. The connection of the Brentanos to the Loenings remains unclear.

thinks of me so kindly. Kind regards and best new year's wishes also to Prof. Marty, who, as is usual at this time, will also now probably be staying with you.

To yourself, my revered teacher, a renewed expression of my ever unchanged and unchangeable reverence, love, and gratitude,

from your

Edmund Husserl

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