

# The critique of language\*

*Fritz Mauthner*†

TRANSLATED BY *Christian Romuss*‡

## Primitive Philosophy

The beautiful sentence: *Completeness is the death of scholarship*, was arguably minted by its coiner, Wilamowitz-Moellendorf,<sup>1</sup> only against those professors who cannot to their satisfaction gather enough scholarly references about every trifle; in the historical sciences, however, the obsessive pursuit of history into ages of which we can know nothing continues to be inherited down the generations. This obsession has been further intensified by Darwinism or the doctrine of evolution; in earnest one set about tracing all human culture's forms of expression back to their primordial origins. Even the philosophy of primordial man, primitive philosophy, was supposed to be extrapolated; the protoplasm of philosophy was supposed to be discovered or constructed.

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\* The following extracts are from Fritz Mauthner's *Wörterbuch der Philosophie. Neue Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache* (Munich: Georg Müller, 1910-1911). This work, *Dictionary of Philosophy: New Contributions to a Critique of Language*, is in the public domain in the original German and available on archive.org. It remains untranslated into English. This is the second selection of extracts to be published in *Synkrêtic* (see 'The critique of language' in *Synkrêtic* N°2, pp. 148-152).

† Fritz Mauthner (1849-1923) was a Bohemian Jewish journalist, writer and philosopher. His best-known works are *Contributions to a Critique of Language* (1901-2), *Dictionary of Philosophy* (1910-1911) and *Atheism and its History in the West* (1920-23). He lived in Berlin, Freiburg, and Meersburg, Germany.

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We laugh today when we read, as a chapter-heading in Brucker's 'Brief Questions about Philosophical History from the Beginning of the World to the Birth of Christ' (1731), the question: *Were there already philosophers before the flood?* And when, in the subsequent section, we find an almost hilarious refutation of the claim that Adam was a perfect dialectician, physicist, ethicist, mathematician, politician, and finally the most perfect polyhistor. We laugh at Brucker, despite the fact that he treats the question not without some irony. Likewise, we ought not to take the latest attempts to write a history of primitive philosophy in less biblical language all too seriously.

I'm thinking in that regard of Wundt's essay 'The Origins of Philosophy and the Philosophy of the Primitive Races' (Culture of the Present, Part I, Sect. V). Wundt writes at length about primitive logic, primitive psychology, primitive natural philosophy, and primitive ethics. He espouses that dangerous principle of historical scholarship which equates, on one hand, the beginnings of a cultural domain and, on the other, the relevant circumstances of the so-called primitive races of the present day; for that reason, the concepts 'origins of philosophy' and 'philosophy of the primitive races' are for him equivalent. He sees quite well that primitive philosophy was not yet acquainted with our logic; that the doctrine of the soul of primordial ages still influences our psychology; that primitive natural philosophy to be sure already possessed the concept of cause but considered magic, the miracle-working God, a sufficient cause; that the primitive ethics of the primitive races often enough rivals the so-called illuminated ethics of our Christian and philosophical West. For comparative anthropology, such investigations may yield some godless proposition or other, which Wundt is wary of formulating explicitly.

If we wanted to deal seriously with the question about a primitive philosophy, then we would have first to define both words for this context more precisely.

*Primitive* is a terribly relative concept. When in art history one speaks of the primitive, then one thinks of Italian painters of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and, in turn, of English painters of the 19<sup>th</sup>; therefore of painters of a very historical period who were (or acted) only