Gustav Teichmüller and the systematic significance of studying the history of concepts
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The philosopher Gustav Teichmüller (who was born in 1832) held the chair of philosophy at the University of Tartu (Dorpat) from 1871 until his early death in 1888. He was one of the first to systematically study the history of concepts. Through this interest, he paved the way for what was to become the most comprehensive representation of the history of concepts to this date: the “Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophy” (historical dictionary of philosophy, 13 volumes), a project which was begun in 1971 and completed last year. The history of concepts is relevant in philosophy because conceptual distinctions fundamentally shape cognition. Because these conceptual distinctions are deeply entrenched in our way of thinking, we are not usually aware of this influence. How we view the world depends crucially on the concepts we have. These concepts, however, are the products of their history. In the case of philosophical concepts, this history reaches back as far as the ancient world. It is for this reason that Greek Philosophy was one of Teichmüller’s main interests. Following Herbart, he viewed philosophy as the systematic analysis and refinement of concepts. Refining concepts in such a way allows us to make new distinctions, or to transform or abandon old ones. In contrast to Herbart, Teichmüller emphasized that this process presupposes detailed historical studies. This does not mean, however, that Teichmüller embraced a kind of historicism – the view that philosophy and its history are one and the same thing. On the contrary, he derogatorily referred to such a view as “historical psychology”. Rather, the history of concepts in Teichmüllers sense has to be understood as a history of problems which are reflected in conceptual distinctions. This means that the history of concepts, which brings to light explicit and implicit distinctions, can be applied as a kind of hermeneutics of world views – as the basis on which we can systematically reconstruct concepts in a new light. It is the aim of this presentation to unfold such an understanding of the history of concepts in view of Teichmüller’s contribution to it.