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The Failure of Wilhelm Dilthey's Psychological
Project: *Erlebnis* and The Problems of Historical
Inquiry in the Late Nineteenth Century

By

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“Aside I turn to the holy, unspeakable, mysterious Night. A far lies the world – sunk in a deep grave – waste and lonely is its place. In the chords of the bosom blows a deep sadness. I am ready to sink away in drops of dew, and mingle with the ashes. – The distances of memory, the wishes of youth, the dreams of childhood, the brief joys and vain hopes of a whole long life, arise in gray garments, like an evening vapor after the sunset. In other regions the light has pitched its joyous tents. What if it should never return to its children, who wait for it with the faith of innocence?”

-Novalis, *Hymns to the Night*

Contents:

Acknowledgements	iv
Introduction	1
The <i>Materialismusstreit</i> and <i>Lebensphilosophie</i>	6
The <i>Einleitung</i>	25
Dilthey and the Psychologists	37
The Determinate Concept of <i>Erlebnis</i>	50
The <i>Ideen</i> and Ebbinghaus's Critique	58
Conclusion	68
Bibliography	75

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Introduction

Philosophy in Germany during the second half of the nineteenth century was a field of exceptional heterogeneity. After the breakdown of the Hegelian system under the combined weight of attacks by the German Historical School and positivist methodology, philosophy's role in the modern world and its status as a discipline were open questions. One of the preeminent philosophers explicitly concerned with this historical disintegration was Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911). Caught between the intellectual requirements of attempting to re-ground Reason's claims in history and the more practical concern of uniting the unstable fields of the 'human sciences' within Germany, Dilthey's work from the period of 1882 until his death in 1911 was generally focused around the question of attempting to discover a common *Grundwissenschaft*, a 'base' or 'ground' science, for the *Geisteswissenschaften*, or 'human sciences.'

However, Dilthey hoped that his efforts in these areas would also help address a larger problem. In the middle of the 1850s, Dilthey was a student participating directly in the seminars of the legendary German historian Leopold von Ranke, who struck Dilthey as "the embodiment of historical insight as such."¹ At precisely this time, Ranke was giving a series of lectures outlining his vision of history. In a lecture given in 1854, before the King Maximilian II of Bavaria, Ranke criticized the classical Idealists' view of history as 'progressive,' arguing instead that "all ages [were] immediate to God."² Instead, Ranke described "great spiritual tendencies" in every epoch of mankind, trends and historical forces which, taken together, constitute "the real

¹ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Selected Works*, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi, vol. 4 (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 387-389. Henceforth this series will be referred to as *SW*, vol. X., p. X.

² Leopold von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, ed. George Iggers, trans. Wilma A. Iggers (NY: Routledge, 2011) p. 21.

substance of the continuous movement of mankind.”³ Ranke, however, did not address many of the philosophical problems that arose from his critique of Hegelianism. For example, what could the individual know of these tendencies? How could one represent them? Ranke wrote that the historian must “perceive the difference between the individual epochs, in order to observe the inner necessity of the sequence.”⁴ Could this be done ‘from inside,’ as these epochs turned over into one another, so that one could grasp the essence of history as it marched on; or must the sequence be reconstructed *ex post facto*?

Dilthey also came to an awareness of this general philosophical problematic through a more practical project. With the Hegelian system’s methodology of interpreting history as the dialectical process of the self-realization of *Geist* becoming increasingly untenable, and Ranke’s philosophical underpinnings left mostly unarticulated, a new methodology for understanding history and the relations between historical particulars had to be produced. In 1860, at the age of twenty-seven, Dilthey submitted a paper – “Schleiermacher’s Hermeneutical System in Relation to Earlier Protestant Hermeneutics”⁵ – to the Schleiermacher Society, which won first prize.⁶ He would then be commissioned by the Society to write a biography of Schleiermacher, the first volume of which was published ten years later, in 1870.⁷ For Dilthey, the question arose here in a practical fashion: how does the individual’s life, particular as it is, relate to the history of the world? How does one understand another? If Schleiermacher’s ‘life’s work’ was the

³ Leopold von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, ed. George Iggers, trans. Wilma A. Iggers (NY: Routledge, 2011) p. 21.

⁴ Leopold von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, ed. George Iggers, trans. Wilma A. Iggers (NY: Routledge, 2011) p. 22.

⁵ *SW*, vol. 4., p. 33-227.

⁶ Eric S. Nelson, “Introduction: Wilhelm Dilthey in Context,” in *Interpreting Dilthey*, ed. Eric S. Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 1.

⁷ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Martin Redeker, vol. 13 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970). Henceforth this series will be referred to as *GS*, vol. X., p. X.

development of a certain view of hermeneutics, then did Schleiermacher himself know that? Was he aware of this thread running throughout his life, which would later be used to organize his work into a general picture?⁸ *Why* did his life take the course it did, assuming we are, as Kant had so convincingly shown at the beginning of the 19th century, free and rational agents? How can one *be* a free agent if he is *not* aware of this thread?

These questions are related to Dilthey's attempt to ground the *Geisteswissenschaften* by an articulation of a *Grundwissenschaft*, or 'foundational science,' because Dilthey intended to bind the *Geisteswissenschaften* together in common principles by virtue of their common object of study: what Dilthey referred to as *Erlebnis*, or 'lived experience.' For Dilthey, *Erlebnis* was the living through of a coherent life-narrative or history and the source of the phenomena which were the study of the human sciences: the ways individuals and cultures exist in the world. However, because this individual's life takes place within the historical process, this would also – or so hoped Dilthey – allow the individual access to the events and discourses which constitute history at large. What Dilthey ultimately wanted was a science – what he would eventually term a psychology – that could rigorously investigate the ways in which an individual's experiences and beliefs manifest themselves in the expressions of individuals, and, crucially, *why* certain experiences and beliefs lead to certain expressions. In this way, the individual could potentially perform this operation on his *own* mind, and gain something like an 'objective' view of the status of his own normative commitments. For Dilthey, if this was not possible, then it would be

⁸ As Dilthey said concerning the examination of a life in history, "Everything is held together by an inner force and inner bounds which manifest themselves in the definiteness of the individual and the consequent duration of his acquired psychic nexus... We find everywhere a limitation on what is possible. Yet we have the freedom to choose alternatives, and accordingly the wonderful feeling of being able to progress and realize new possibilities of our own existence (*Dasein*)." See *GS*, vol. 7, p. 244-245.

impossible to determine the ‘objective’ legitimacy of competing *Weltanschauungen*, or ‘world-views.’

In order to see how Dilthey’s early psychological project came to be, one must first describe the intellectual climate at the time. To begin with, then, one must provide a brief description of the *Materialismusstreit* – a mid-19th century intellectual and cultural controversy concerning the advancements of the sciences and their threat to the realms of aesthetics and religion. The negative reaction to the *Materialismusstreit* took its primary intellectual inspiration from the intuition that something vital to the experience of man’s being in the world that the established philosophies of the day were neglecting or leaving out; that more could be known about the world and about oneself than was being allowed for. The more formalized manifestations of this impulse took the form of an intellectual movement known as *Lebensphilosophie*, or ‘life-philosophy,’ of which Dilthey was an important figure. Although the *Lebensphilosophen* were a diverse group of thinkers, what they most crucially shared was a belief in the ability of the knowing subject to have *immediate* knowledge. Feeling that the conceptually mediated character of scientific thought mutilated proper representation of the world, they sought recourse in various conceptions of ‘intuition,’ ‘immediate knowledge,’ or some other form of ‘non-scientific’ knowledge.

Dilthey’s use of the concept of ‘life’ follows this trend and attempts to give philosophical grounding to Ranke’s vision of history – and indeed, to go beyond it – by intending to show how the individual has immediate knowledge of the ‘the real substance of the continuous movement of mankind.’ However, although Dilthey wanted the essence of the historical process to be immediately available to the knowing subject, he was well aware of the ways in which Kant had suggested that the world was always conceptually mediated. Therefore, over the course of the

last two decades of the 19th century, Dilthey fashioned a conceptual framework all his own – centering on the concept of *Erlebnis*, or ‘lived experience’ – to attempt to argue that the knowing subject *does*, in a way, have access to immediate knowledge of the substance of history. To show this, Dilthey’s 1883 work, the *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, if combined with various fragments from his *Nachlass*, is especially useful. Therefore, we will begin there, and then eventually move on to see how one of Dilthey’s central presuppositions was challenged by his close friend and colleague: the psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus.⁹ Until 1894, Dilthey had thought that a psychology, properly conceived, could be the foundational science that he envisaged. To see why Dilthey thought his project was possible, and why Ebbinghaus thought it was not, one must examine the prevalent status of psychology at the time and how Dilthey differed from it.

The present study is intended to show firstly, how Dilthey’s initial hopes for psychology emerged out of the intellectual and cultural currents present in Germany at the end of the 19th century; secondly, how his psychology attempted to make the historical process immediately available in its totality to the knowing subject, and therefore to reestablish the freedom of the individual and Reason’s mastery over its environment; and thirdly, how this project eventually failed due to Dilthey’s insistence on this ‘immediate’ availability of the ‘essence’ of history.

Finally, it will be shown how the failure of Dilthey’s project presents, in great clarity, a philosophical problem of its own: that is, how the thinking subject is able to represent history at all. What *is* history, if we, as historical beings, do not have immediate access to it? What is the proper method for representing history? This problem – of the necessity of the intentional

⁹ Hermann Ebbinghaus, “Über erklärende und beschreibende Psychologie”, *Zeitschrift für Psychologie und Physiologie der Sinnesorgane* 9 (1896), p. 161-205.

‘construction’ of historical narratives for the representation of history – reemerged as a problem in the philosophical consciousness of modernity *because* of Dilthey and his generation’s failure to find history immediately given within one’s own life. Dilthey’s work, in its historical failure, thus marks a genuine movement forward in the practice of historical theory. Although certainly not a ‘philosopher of history’ in the old sense, Dilthey and his tradition may eventually be seen as a continuation of philosophy of history. A study which analyzes exclusively Dilthey’s thought, without connecting it to these broader problems, will represent Dilthey as merely a historical oddity; potentially of interest to the philosophical antiquarian, but having little urgency for the contemporary consciousness. However, the philosopher of history who does not explain the historical emergence of his own thought contradicts his most basic principles.

The Materialismstreit and Lebensphilosophie

The era of high German metaphysics and philosophical speculation was coming to an end. Hegel had died in 1831, and Goethe in 1832. Schelling, Hegel’s one-time friend who had articulated a romantic, totalizing *Naturphilosophie*, died in 1854. Søren Kierkegaard and Arthur Schopenhauer, who had each attempted to counter the rational holism of Hegel’s philosophy of history with speculative philosophies of their own, had died in 1855 and 1860 respectively.¹⁰ Friedrich Engels, celebrating the end of this tradition as the opening up of the possibility of a new mode of thought, pronounced the death of Hegel as marking “the collapse of Idealism.”¹¹

¹⁰ For Kierkegaard’s complicated critique of Hegel, see Niels Thulstrup’s *Kierkegaard’s Relation to Hegel* and Jon Stewart’s *Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*. For Schopenhauer’s, see Arthur Hübscher’s *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer in its Intellectual Context* and Rudiger Safranski’s *Schopenhauer and the Wild Years of Philosophy*.

¹¹ Friedrich Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976), p. 4-60.

Engels's remark corresponds to a genuine feeling among the intelligentsia of the time, especially prevalent among natural scientists, that philosophical 'materialism' was to make the Idealist philosophers' thought outmoded.¹²

Kant had – it was thought – delimited the possible realm of knowledge to only what was accessible by the finite human. The knowing subject could not have any true knowledge of what the noumenal world of 'things-in-themselves' was 'really like,' because man had specific parameters in his own mind that determined both the extent of what he could know and the form of what he did know. Kant explicitly registered his own disappointment with the limits of purely abstract thought: "It is humiliating to human reason," Kant wrote, that "it achieves nothing in its pure employment..." and that "the greatest and perhaps the sole use of all philosophy of pure reason is therefore only negative..."¹³ This was, in turn, interpreted by many to mean that philosophy's role was to be restricted only to the defense and maintenance of the sciences; as the neo-Kantian Paul Natorp would later describe it, "At first philosophy hid in her womb the germs of all sciences; but once she had given birth to them and given them motherly care during their infancy, and once they had, under her tutelage, become mature and great, she is not averse to watching them go out into the big world in order to conquer it."¹⁴ It seemed to many following Kant's critical legacy that the only path to sure knowledge was by following the kind of empirical testing that the natural sciences had already been doing; they had, after all, been employing the same basic assumptions about the validity of knowledge that Kant had given such

¹² Friedrich A. Lange, *The History of Materialism*, trans. Ernest Chester Thomas (NY: Harcourt, Brace & Company, Inc., 1925) p. 624-62.

¹³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. Quoted in Eckart Förster, *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy*, trans. Brady Bowman (MA: Harvard University Press, 2012) p. 42.

¹⁴ Paul Natorp, *Philosophie und Pädagogik* (Paderborn: Salzwasser-Verlag, 2015) p. 237.

convincing philosophical articulation of. The subjective interpreter must be pushed out of the frame as much as possible to achieve genuine knowledge about the world.

This general view of philosophy's relation to the sciences was accompanied and strengthened by a concomitant shift in what people looked to abstract thought to achieve. Although the metaphysicians of the previous half-century had been dealing precisely with the question of the *rationality* of thought and what could be known, and their answers were far from a unified pronouncement, what was of intellectual interest to the natural scientists of the day was what was effective in mastering reality; the domination of the natural world and the conditions of its susceptibility to our mastery of it. The European Enlightenment was slowly transforming into a definite 'scientism,' and the mechanistic laws which had proven so effective in determining the operations and laws of the external, physical world were soon sought in the sciences of man. This resulted in what has since become known since as the *Materialismsstreit*, or 'materialism controversy.'

On September 18th, 1854, Rudolph Wagner, the head of the Physiological Institute at Göttingen, gave an address entitled *Menschenschöpfung und Seelensubstanz* ("Human Creativity and the Substance of the Soul"). Wagner was a devout Protestant, worried about the possibility of the advances in natural sciences giving increased justification to a full-blown materialist *Weltanschauung*. In this address, he attempted to defuse the dangers of the sciences by an articulation of their limitations. For example, he argued that none of the scientific evidence produced by the newly created field of 'anthropology' was inconsistent with Biblical doctrine; they had not, for example, been able to find definitive evidence that all humans were not descended from Adam and Eve. As he put it, "There is not a single point in the biblical doctrine

of the soul... that would contradict any tenet of modern physiology and natural science.”¹⁵ Appealing to the classic Protestant notion of ‘double-truth,’ where faith and reason operate according to their own truth-functions, Wagner hoped to keep a spiritual realm of value and morality not only open and available, but untouchable by the results of secular reason. He was prompted to do so on this particular occasion, and to repeat the sentiment in another pamphlet published a few weeks later,¹⁶ by the writings of a young scientist then living in Italy: Carl Vogt. Eight years prior, Vogt had published his *Physiologie Briefen*, wherein he controversially argued that there was “no free will, that the mind is nothing more than brain activity, and that... thought is to the brain as urine is to the kidneys.”¹⁷ Wagner cited these passages directly from Vogt, criticizing especially these passages, which he accused of promoting a ‘crass materialism.’

Vogt responded in 1855, publishing his polemical *Köhlerglaube und Wissenschaft* (“Blind Faith and Science”). In between attacks on Wagner’s character – Vogt referred to Wagner at one point as a “miserable wretch”¹⁸ – Vogt argued that those discoveries did, in fact, contradict Biblical doctrine: for example, geology had proven the world could not be only a few thousand years old. Vogt pointed to other scientific discoveries as well, including how the connection of electronic impulses in the brain to active thought, and their cessation upon the death of one’s body, meant that the mind or soul could not be immortal, as well as the fact that the requirements of human biological reproduction meant that there being a single human pair from which all people were descended was impossible. However, as much as Vogt wanted to do away with the overtly theological remnants of Germany society – remnants which were intimately tied up with

¹⁵ Rudolph Wagner, *Menschenschöpfung und Seelensubstanz*. (Göttingen: George H: Wigand, 1854) p. 10-16.

¹⁶ Rudolph Wagner, *Über Wissen und Glauben, Fortsetzung der Betrachtungen über Menschenschöpfung und Seelensubstanz* (Göttingen: George H: Wigand, 1854), p. 30.

¹⁷ Frederick Beiser, *After Hegel* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 59

¹⁸ Carl Vogt, *Köhlerglaube und Wissenschaft*, (Göttingen: George H: Wigand, 1855) p. 10.

reactionary, monarchist political movements at the time – and as persuasive as he was in arguing against Wagner’s doctrine of ‘double-truth,’ it is clear that his general direction of argumentation does not necessarily lead to a sophisticated materialist epistemology.¹⁹ This apparent failure is important because it would be pointed out by two different philosophers, both early leaders in the neo-Kantian reaction, who would publish works within the next ten years accusing the materialist vogue of the day of just this weakness: Rudolf Hermann Lotze and Friedrich A. Lange. Their critiques were balanced: they wanted to point out the exaggerations and overzealous conclusions reached by some of the more reductive materialists of the time, while avoiding any relapses into an old, Romantic philosophy of nature.

Hermann Lotze (1817-1881), who had been present at Wagner’s initial address and had been cited by Wagner explicitly, would attempt to rebuild the groundwork of moral, religious, and aesthetic beliefs so that they were consistent with the contemporary advancements in science.²⁰ Lotze’s *Mikrokosmos*, which appeared in three volumes from 1856 to 1864, attempted to resolve the conflict between reason and faith by showing the form of the conflict itself to be false; the real conflict was between a world of natural existence or being, and the world of human values.²¹ There were two kinds of questions for Lotze: “*Was ist?*” (What is?), and “*Was gilt?*” (What is valid?). This distinction would eventually prove extraordinarily influential for later neo-Kantians.²² Although Lotze had, some years earlier, criticized the earlier Romantic

¹⁹ Wagner was, in fact, just such a conservative; Vogt, for his part, was a rather radical leftist who had apparently spent time with both Bakunin and Proudhon in Paris approximately 15 years prior, in the early 1840s. This connection between materialism and the liberal movements occurring in Germany in the mid-19th century was another reason for its cultural currency among intellectuals. See Steffen Haßlauer, “Polemik und Argumentation in der Wissenschaft des 19. Jahrhunderts,” *Reihe Germanistische Linguistik* 291 (2010): p. 59-66.

²⁰ Frederick Beiser, “Lotze’s *Mikrokosmos*,” in *Ten Neglected Classics of Philosophy*, ed. Eric Schliesser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 90.

²¹ Frederick Beiser, *Late German Idealism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) p. 239-256.

²² Heinrich Rickert, for example, would eventually use the exact same formulation in 1921 as part of his attempt to develop a critical *Wertphilosophie*. As he said: “*Seiendes ‘ist,’ Werte ‘gelten.’*” See Heinrich Rickert, *System der Philosophie. Teil 1: allgemeine Grundlegung der Philosophie* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1921), p. 114.

Naturphilosophie for its use of concepts like ‘vital force,’ and, more generally, against any such speculative theories of life,²³ his *Mikrokosmos* itself posited a new metaphysic, which saw in all things a teleological end; the simultaneous rise of Darwinism in the mid-1860s eventually proved more influential than Lotze’s cosmological program.²⁴

However, the motivating spirit behind Lotze’s general philosophical contributions was an attempt to revive the possibility of aesthetic, moral, or religious judgements in the face of the new, materialist intellectual atmosphere. In 1856, Lotze was already describing the effects of the materialist movement on the possibilities of thought:

The rapid advances of the sciences... have ‘disenchanted the world,’ and... have undermined the old moral and religious beliefs, which now seem like little more than childish mythology. We no longer see the earth as the center of the universe but as only one speck in a vast cosmos; we no longer find friendly spirits in nature but encounter an impersonal machine; and we no longer discover beauty in the world but regard it as a passing sensation in the mind of the beholder.²⁵

Lotze’s cosmology, then, if perhaps an outdated method of explaining the natural world, may be negatively interpreted as an attempt to rediscover meaning or spiritual life in the world.

The other major figure to push back against the materialists was F.A. Lange (1828-1875), who pursued a different strategy. Rather than try to establish a competing metaphysic, he attempted to show the new materialism was simply a fashion or historical overreaction. He published a work which has, because of this method, perhaps aged better than Lotze’s attempt at cosmology. Lange’s *Geschichte des Materialismus* (“History of Materialism”) was published in

²³ See Lotze’s *Allgemeine Pathologie*, published in 1842, and an article he published one year later, “Leben, Lebenskraft.”

²⁴ Alfred Kelly, *The Descent of Darwin* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1981) p. 1-7. See also, Robert Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

²⁵ Frederick Beiser, “Lotze’s *Mikrokosmos*,” in *Ten Neglected Classics of Philosophy*, ed. Eric Schliesser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 90.

1866, and eventually republished in a much-expanded, two-volume form in 1875. In terms of philosophical content, the work is primarily a restatement of the Kantian separation between a noumenal physical realm and a phenomenal realm of value. While Lange does give praise to materialism for vanquishing the old Aristotelian notion of teleology in the natural world, he points out that materialists seemed to have simply either forgotten or ignored the lessons of Kant; that our sense-perceptions – by which we can formulate any scientific-materialist laws at all – are governed by our perceptive and cognitive organizations, so that “the concept of causal necessity cannot be derived from experience but originates in the *a priori* forms of cognition.”²⁶ Dilthey, clearly appreciative of these Kantians efforts’ to push back against such crude reductionism, wrote in an 1877 review that “Lange’s book signals a crisis in our spiritual life. When it was produced, the thought of Vogt and Moleschott prevailed among the educated classes and materialism appeared to be the last word of science... [Lange’s book] is and remains one of the books which mark the crucial changes of the philosophical spirit of our century.”²⁷

As with Lotze, Lange also extended his critique beyond purely philosophical debates, and described the impact of the rise of materialism on modern life. In the second volume of his *Geschichte*, published in 1875, he connects the rise of a general materialism in thought with the earliest beginnings of a more ‘practical,’ ‘realist’ approach to reality. In one passage, Lange described the effects of the new realist attitude on the German social world in the 1820s and 1830s:

Now, for the first time in Germany, it was possible for a tradesman and founder of joint-stock companies such as *Hansemann* to become the spokesman for public opinion... In the domain of education, *polytechnic institutes*... were founded by the citizens of the more prosperous towns... At exactly the same time, interest in the *natural sciences* finally took root in Germany, and the leading role in this was played by a science which

²⁶ Frederick Beiser, *After Hegel* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 92.

²⁷ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Westermanns illustrierte deutsche Monatshefte* 41. (1877) p. 548-550.

was particularly closely associated with practical interests, namely *chemistry*. Once Liebig in Giessen had set up the first laboratory in a German university, the dam of prejudice was breached, and when one excellent chemist after another came out of the Giessen school, the other universities felt compelled to follow the example thus given.²⁸

This passage is important because it underscores the importance of the natural sciences to other cultural conflicts within 19th century Germany; there were serious debates concerning the methods of the universities accompanying the beginning of Germany's process of industrialization. Not only was there a more strictly philosophical debate going on concerning problems like the status of free will and the relation of thought to physical processes, there was also a 'value-debate': what should the new, modern Germany care about, and how ought it go about achieving these goals?

The general emphasis of the time on 'effectiveness' or pragmatic concerns, combined with the beginnings of breakthroughs in the industrialization process and the success of the natural sciences in facilitating these breakthroughs, meant that the universities had to shift their aims and methods to accommodate the new demands. The repercussions can be felt by the rapid change in enrollment statistics. In 1870, about 14,000 students were registered at all German universities; by 1880, there were 21,000, and by 1914 it had reached 61,000.²⁹

The increase in the size and importance of the university, although spurred on most forcefully by the natural sciences, naturally resulted in the concomitant growth of the human or social sciences. The question then arose – how should these new sciences operate? The true complexity of the problem was foreseen by one of the leading German scientists of the day, the

²⁸ Friedrich A. Lange, *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart* (1875) ed., Alfred Schmidt, (Frankfurt, 1974) p. 529. Quoted from Herbert Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany 1831-1933*, trans. Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) p. 19.

²⁹ Fritz K. Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890-1933* (MA: Harvard University Press, 1969) p. 52.

‘psycho-physicist’ Hermann von Helmholtz, who had remarked that what it meant to “draw from knowledge of individual cases so that one might formulate a law” was so unclear when it concerned the subject matter of the human sciences that “[the human sciences] were at best something that might occur in a distant future.”³⁰ However, Helmholtz’s warning was not heeded by the majority of intellectuals at the time; an increasing number of social scientists would begin to employ natural-scientific methods.³¹

When these methods were applied to the human sciences, which were intended to explore the phenomena of the socio-historical world, those phenomena which were felt to be too ineffable to be subjected to the strict requirements of natural-scientific research were simply considered beyond the remit of knowledge. The identification of the natural-scientific method with the method for establishing ‘valid’ knowledge *tout court* implied that the psychological or spiritual realm could only be investigated by pure intuition or Romantic genius. It was against this overreaction that Dilthey protested, and in doing so, wrote his first major work, the *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*.

Dilthey was obviously not the only individual reacting against this restriction of knowledge. Although it was not as popular in the formal academic circles of the day, where a sober recognition of the necessity of conceptual labor bordered on a kind of intellectual monasticism, the desire to return philosophy to its home in the world led to the flowering of an

³⁰ David Cahan, *Helmholtz: A Life in Science* (IL: Chicago University Press, 2018) p. 507. As we will see shortly, Helmholtz did have something to say concerning psychology, but this was only because he considered psychology a natural science.

³¹ For example, when Immanuel Hermann Fichte, son of the Idealist philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, wrote his book on the newly nascent field of ‘anthropology’ in 1856, he subtitled it “The Doctrine of the Human Soul: a new scientific foundation for natural scientists, psychiatrists, and scientifically educated people in general.” See Immanuel Hermann Fichte, *Anthropologie: Die Lehre von der menschlichen Seele. Neubegründet auf naturwissenschaftlichen Wege für Naturforscher, Seelenärzte, und wissenschaftlich Gebildete überhaupt* (Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1856).

entire intellectual-cultural movement which came to be known as *Lebensphilosophie*, or ‘life-philosophy.’³² As it began to bloom, the neo-Kantian Friedrich Paulsen gave voice to the widespread cultural dissatisfaction which precipitated its popularity:

Something like disillusionment can be felt: scientific research does not seem to have fulfilled the promises which were made for it – of a comprehensive and absolutely certain view of the world and a philosophy of life firmly based on necessary conceptions... a new generation, mistrustful of reason as an earlier generation had been of faith, turned to science: exact enquiry was to secure the ground beneath our feet and give us an accurate picture of the world. But science does not achieve that... It produces only a thousand fragmentary pieces of knowledge, in part tolerably certain, above all in the natural sciences, which at least give technology a foundation, in part eternally debatable, eternally subject to reevaluation, as in the historical sciences... science does not appease the hunger for knowledge, it does not even fulfil the desire for personal development; it requires the pledging of all one’s powers and gives only meagre fruits in reward.³³

Lebensphilosophie, therefore, was at its cultural core a disappointment with what was found by scientific inquiries into nature, and a subsequent turn to other potential modes of knowledge. What separates *Lebensphilosophie* from the earlier Romantic philosophies of the late 18th and early 19th centuries was the totality it purported to investigate; *Lebensphilosophie* sought insight in the individual’s life, as opposed to Goethe’s or Schelling’s investigations into the nature of Nature. There was something about the concept of ‘life’ that seemed to be able to bring clarity to a diverse range of thinkers. Both for the philosophers of life, as well as for other groups like the Baden School of neo-Kantianism, there was a sense that philosophy had become sidetracked; that its wandering eye had become seduced by the vagaries and intricacies of

³² For Wilhelm Traugott Krug’s first formal definition of ‘*Lebensphilosophie*,’ and its uses at the beginning of the 19th century, see Giuseppe Bianco, “Philosophies of Life,” in *The Cambridge History of Modern European Thought: Volume 1, The Nineteenth Century*, ed. Warren Breckman and Peter Gordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 159.

³³ Friedrich Paulsen, *Die deutschen Universitäten und das Universitätsstudium* (Berlin: A. Asher & Co., 1902) p. 80-81.

exploring the depths of the scientific world.³⁴ In doing so, it had gotten too close to its subject: hunched over his microscope, the scientist had peered into even the deepest parts of cellular life, but, in the process, had become blind to the broader world of meaning and life around him in a kind of intellectual asceticism. The *Lebensphilosophen*, in varying ways, sought to redirect man's attention back to what was 'important': one's own life, his time in this world and what that time meant.

Some of the most well-known of the life-philosophers include Friedrich Nietzsche, Georg Simmel, Henri Bergson, Max Scheler, and Dilthey himself. It is not at all clear that these different writers had similar understandings of what the effect of this new emphasis on the enhancement on 'life' would be, nor even what the concept of 'life' was; this makes defining *Lebensphilosophie* exceptionally difficult. The general attitude, however, can perhaps be clarified by noting the connection between the 'life-philosophers' and Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer is known today primarily for his pessimism. However, Schopenhauer's pessimism is not simply a hermeneutic moment, tacked on to his larger metaphysical theses; it is rooted in his very vision of what philosophy was. In the second edition of his magnum opus, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* ("The World as Will and Representation"), published in 1844, Schopenhauer elaborated on his basic conception of philosophy. Because all content, and therefore all possible meaning, is derived from experience, for Schopenhauer philosophy was to direct itself towards 'the correct understanding of experience,' the method of which was 'the interpretation of its meaning and content.'³⁵ As Frederick Beiser has put it, Schopenhauer

³⁴ Thinkers like Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert were also concerned that an overemphasis on the problems of the hard sciences left important questions concerning the status of value claims unaddressed. For their relation to Dilthey, see Charles Bambach, *Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism* (NY: Cornell University Press, 1995) p. 57-126.

³⁵ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (Digitale Bibliothek, 2017) p. 850-852.

believed that “Philosophy must begin... from the intuition of what is given, and it must limit itself to the interpretation and understanding of that alone.”³⁶ Therefore, the general desire for immediacy which so clearly marks the philosophical approach of the *Lebensphilosophen* finds itself in utero in Schopenhauer’s commitment to the analysis of experience.

Schopenhauer’s philosophical approach was taken up by the *Lebensphilosophie* movement in two different ways: the first is a ‘vitalist’ feeling concerning the stultification of one’s creative energies and instinctual impulses by modern forms of life, which took as a cultural ancestor Schopenhauer’s pessimism; the second is the adoption of a kind of proto-existential or phenomenological analysis as philosophical method, which took the ‘analysis of experience’ as its basic starting point. It is his specific construal of this second aspect which is unique to Dilthey, who took this idea of the ‘analysis of experience’ to its furthest and connected it to the process of understanding history in its movement.

The first aspect was an ardent opposition to the standardization and mechanization of life that was being brought about by Germany’s rapid industrialization. It was a kind of vitalist variant of what Marx had called ‘alienation,’ but rather than focusing on one’s alienation from control over the organization of society or the direction of history, it was a psychological alienation from his own deepest, most instinctive impulses. It was a reaction against the widespread fondness for what would come to be called ‘instrumental reason’ by later generations of thinkers; a kind of sterilized, fettered, mechanical vision of rationality, employed for purposes and ends that did not take sufficient account of man’s lived desires and commitments. It was a vision of rationality that promoted a strong intellectual hygiene, lent strength by the scientific

³⁶ Frederick Beiser, *After Hegel* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 32.

successes of the 17th and 18th century Enlightenment. The 19th century, however, reflected a widespread social malaise with this approach, brought on by several generations living in a world that was rapidly becoming more and more ‘disenchanted,’ as Lotze, and Max Weber after him, had described it.

One of the most widely read articulations of this impulse, which has often been pointed to as archetypal for a ‘vulgar’ variant of *Lebensphilosophie*, is Ludwig Klages’s *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele* (“The Spirit as Adversary of the Soul”), which appeared in three volumes from 1929 to 1933. In the introduction to the first volume of the work, Klages claimed that, “...the ‘thesis’ which has guided all our enquiries for the past three decades or so [is] that body and soul are inseparably connected poles of the unity of life into which the spirit inserts itself from the outside like a wedge, in an effort to set them apart from each other, that is, to de-soul the body and disembody the soul, and so finally to smother any life which it can attain.”³⁷ For Klages, *Geist* – still, for him as for others of his day, linked with the ‘arch-rationalist’ Hegel – was a term which carried all the negative connotations of “modern, industrial, and intellectual rationalization, while *Seele* represented the possibility of overcoming alienated intellectuality in favor of a new-found earthly rootedness.”³⁸ Klages carried the idea of the irrational will through to the end, and made reason actually offensive or antithetical to what it meant to be a flourishing, feeling human. This denigration of the status of the intellect and rational thought has sometimes been pointed to as contributing to the kind of cultural and intellectual atmosphere that would later accompany the rise of Nazism, alongside Oswald Spengler’s bestseller *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (“The Decline of the West”).

³⁷ Ludwig Klages, *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele* (Bonn: Herbert Grundmann, 1981) p. 7.

³⁸ Steven Ascheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890-1990* (CA: University of California Press, 1994) p. 80-81.

Klages went further than most of the other *Lebensphilosophen* with this divorcing of life and the intellect. Max Scheler, who no less an authority than Martin Heidegger had referred to as “the strongest philosophical force... in contemporary Europe and in contemporary philosophy as such,”³⁹ specifically distanced himself from such an interpretation. In explicit repudiation of the kind of ‘vulgar’ celebration of life that Klages represented, Scheler wrote that “Spirit infuses life with ideas, but only life is capable of initiating and realizing spiritual activity, from its simplest act to the achievement of a task of great spiritual content.”⁴⁰ This is why, according to Scheler, Klages – the “fiercest opponent of all positivist conceptions of man” – in fact becomes “uncritical.”⁴¹ Spirit and Life were not identical, but neither were they diametrically opposed to one another.

This does not mean, of course, that Scheler was a great defender of the modern world. He too recognized the constraining and stultifying effects of an overly ‘instrumentalized’ reason and recommended its rehabilitation. Scheler clearly anticipated that the overcoming of reason’s instrumentalization would allow for previously unforeseen insights to be gained, and he did it in a work whose title explicitly referenced the concept of life:

It will be like the first step into a flowering garden by a man kept for years in a dark prison. This prison will be our human environment bounded by a reason directed solely at what can be measured and mechanized, and the civilization of such an environment. And the garden will be God’s colorful world that – albeit at a distance – we long to salute and have open up to us. And the prisoner will be European Man of today and yesterday, who, sighing and groaning, strides under the burden of his own mechanisms and who, his eyes turned earthward and heaviness in his limbs, has forgotten his God and his world.⁴²

³⁹ Fritz Heinemann, *Neue Wege der Philosophie: Geist, Leben, Existenz, eine Einführung in die Philosophie der Gegenwart* (Leipzig: Quelle und Meyer, 1929) p. 374. Quoted from Peter Gordon, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (MA: Harvard University Press, 2010) p. 71.

⁴⁰ Max Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* (München: Nymphenburger, 1947) p. 81.

⁴¹ Max Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* (München: Nymphenburger, 1947) p. 80.

⁴² Max Scheler, “Versuche einer Philosophie des Lebens,” *vom Umsturz der Werte*, p. 339. Quoted in Rüdiger Safranski, *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*, trans. Ewald Osers (MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 54.

Scheler believed that the earlier generation of the philosophers of life, like Dilthey and Nietzsche, had planted the seeds of this generalized change in *Weltanschauung* by reopening the immediate knowledge of life, previously denied, as a space for genuine investigation.

Perhaps the greatest of the philosophers who have been subsumed under the heading of ‘life-philosopher,’ to the point of potentially transcending the label, is Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche and Dilthey, as personalities, are perhaps polar opposites; however, they share great similarities in both their philosophical concerns and their solutions, parallels which have gone underappreciated. The best place to see this similarity is in Nietzsche’s *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (“Beyond Good and Evil”), which appeared in 1886, three years after Dilthey’s *Einleitung*. In it, Nietzsche advocates for much the same thing that Dilthey had three years prior: he writes how he hoped that psychology would become the “queen of the sciences, for whose service and preparation the other sciences exist,” for psychology “is now again the path to the fundamental problems.”⁴³ Like Dilthey, Nietzsche hoped that psychology could describe the “development” of the ‘will to power,’ so as to perhaps to eventually master it.

Nietzsche, like Dilthey, thought that to overcome relativism, one would have to inspect the development of one’s own psychic development and subject it to criticism. As Robert Pippin has put it, “he is primarily interested in what we need to say about the psyche to understand what happens when we act on the basis of some value claim or express in some way a commitment to a value.”⁴⁴ This is analogous to Dilthey’s interests in developing a psychological grounding for his ‘Critique of Historical Reason.’ One might say that Nietzsche and Dilthey shared a concern

⁴³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (NY: Vintage Books, 1989) p. 32.

⁴⁴ Robert Pippin, *Nietzsche, Psychology, and First Philosophy* (IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010) p. 2.

with the possibilities of observing the process of coming to possess some value, or of holding something valuable. Nietzsche and Dilthey, then, two figures often considered as sources of the modern resurgence of hermeneutics, were, at different times, simultaneously concerned with surpassing the possibilities contained within the constraints of the ‘hermeneutic circle.’⁴⁵ At least at some point, they’d hoped that something like an ‘objective’ view of the development of judgements could be grasped; that historicism could genuinely be ‘overcome’, so that one could, as Nietzsche had said, ‘go beyond’ good and evil.

It is worth pointing out that Nietzsche’s similarities with Dilthey are, interestingly, the opposite of Dilthey’s similarities with the rest of the *Lebensphilosophen*. Nietzsche was the least likely to entertain a proto-phenomenological analysis of experience – at least not in a ‘scientific’ mode, if perhaps indeed in a poetic one – but one of the only philosophers of life who would entertain themselves explicitly with the challenges posed to judgement claims by historical relativism. However, despite the similarities with Dilthey and the distance from the other *Lebensphilosophen* that emerge from Nietzsche’s explicit preoccupation with historical relativism, this relativism itself only emerges from Nietzsche’s more fundamental insistence that values and meanings are distillations of, and derive from, more base or personal drives, which Nietzsche himself found a basis for in his proposed singular ‘will to power.’ Nietzsche too, then, felt that he could give a certain description of the concept of ‘life,’ and hoped for a psychology that could trace its development.

The second aspect or method of the *Lebensphilosophen* was precisely this moment briefly mentioned above: an early version of a phenomenological analysis of ‘experience.’ Henri

⁴⁵ Charles Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 25, no. 1 (September 1971): p. 6

Bergson, along with Nietzsche, was one of the most widely read *Lebenphilosophen*, and represents the height of an explicitly ‘intuitionist’ approach to philosophy. Bergson’s ability to frequently draw large crowds testifies to the general cultural mood that *Lebensphilosophie* was giving expression to; after the publication of his 1907 work *L’Évolution créatrice*, more than 700 people on average would attempt to squeeze into his lecture hall at the Collège de France in Paris, originally designed to hold only 375.⁴⁶ While Nietzsche seemed to understand ‘life’ as ‘what we are concerned about most deeply,’ Bergson’s philosophical efforts were focused at examining exactly what life ‘felt’ like, or the process of putting our ‘experience’ of life into concepts. In this way, Bergson, like Dilthey but completely unlike Nietzsche, was an early practitioner of something like the phenomenological method of philosophy.

Methodologically, Bergson championed the power of ‘intuition’; for him, intuition was the only way to truly grasp what we intend in our use of our most fundamental categories. The aspect of experience most central for Bergson was time, or what he referred to phenomenologically as ‘duration.’ Duration was, for Bergson, our actual experience of time, as opposed to the positivist conception of time, as understood in mathematics or physics, as an infinite succession of divisible ‘seconds.’⁴⁷ We only arrive at this later conception once we take our lived experience and attempt to analyze it using reason. As he put it,

We can, no doubt, by an effort of the imagination, solidify this duration once it has passed by, divide it into pieces set side by side and count all the pieces... But curiously enough, no matter how I manipulate the two concepts, apportion them in various ways, practice on them the most delicate operations of mental chemistry, I shall never obtain anything which resembles the simple intuition I have of duration.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Emily Herring, “Henri Bergson, celebrity” *Aeon*, May 6, 2019.

⁴⁷ Kevin Duong, “The Left and Henri Bergson,” *French Politics* 18 (September 2020): p. 363.

⁴⁸ Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, trans. Mabelle L Andison (NY: Philosophical Library, 1946) p. 198-199.

The split or antagonistic relationship between reason and our lived experience, which we have seen appear above in some of the other *Lebensphilosophen*, can be found in this moment in Bergson's thought. Bergson's ideas eventually led him into "a critique of science which [was] so extreme as to involve the rejection of all intellectual mediation and symbolic activity."⁴⁹ This anxious dismissal of conceptual mediation, or the desire for an *immediate* apprehension of reality, is developed in Bergson's thought in this manner. Because of Bergson's rather ineffable or mystical characterization of 'pure experience,' he thought that experience and rational concepts were counterposed; that "concepts cannot capture the unique, the unforeseeable, and the truly creative – in short, concepts do not grasp concrete reality, but distort it."⁵⁰ For his part, Scheler had also attempted to philosophize phenomenologically or from 'within life,' but his philosophy attempted to ground ethics on the a priori 'experience' of value; this, in turn, was motivated by a desire to recapture philosophically the concerns that Dilthey – a former teacher of Scheler's – was expressing in his debates with the neo-Kantians over the status of value judgements in the human sciences.⁵¹

Until 1896, Dilthey held out hope for a contrary diagnosis concerning life's susceptibility or resistance to analysis from Klages and Bergson. The sharp divide that these thinkers placed between reason and life is the chief reason for the charges of irrationalism that are frequently brought onto *Lebensphilosophie* as a general movement.⁵² Its potential appropriateness for other members of the movement notwithstanding, it is inaccurate to describe Dilthey as positing the

⁴⁹ Rudolf Makkreel, *Dilthey: Philosopher of the Human Studies* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975) p. 211.

⁵⁰ Michael Ermarth, *Wilhelm Dilthey: The Critique of Historical Reason* (IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978) p. 87.

⁵¹ See Davis, Zachary and Anthony Steinbock, "Max Scheler", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2024 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), and Max Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik: Neuer Versuch der Grundlegung eines ethischen Personalismus* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1916).

⁵² Georg Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, trans. Peter Palmer (NJ: Humanities Press Inc., 1981): p. 403-546.

same break. Although his attempts to analyze *Erlebnis* were indeed in a kind of ‘first-person’ or phenomenological mode, he did not establish an uncrossable gap or abyss between our lived experience and what reason could investigate. Nor did Dilthey see philosophy’s focus on ‘life’ as being ‘anti-academic’ or explicitly practical, as the earliest seeds of *Lebensphilosophie* had represented it; Dilthey was precisely interested in exploring the necessary ‘form’ of life. Although nowhere in his actual writings does Dilthey explicitly point to Schopenhauer as exercising any kind of influence on him – he always possessed far too temperate a disposition to admit direct inspiration from the ‘sage of Frankfurt’⁵³ – Dilthey was the philosopher who took the injunction that philosophy’s goal was to establish ‘the correct understanding of experience’ from ‘the intuition of what is given’ most seriously.

Dilthey’s immersion in the world of German academia – at the time, a rather strict, formalized atmosphere – disposed him to regard Schopenhauer’s philosophy as being rather undisciplined; perhaps even overly dramatic. Dilthey specifically criticized Schopenhauer for having a “mood, not a method.”⁵⁴ Dilthey’s efforts to establish a common ground for the human sciences in ‘lived experience’ meant that he had to provide a strong analysis of what exactly he meant by that term; he could not afford to revel in the ‘unconceptualizable’ immediacy of life as Bergson had, because he required a determinate concept, and a suitably durable description of that concept, in order to unite the various disciplines within the human sciences and establish an adequate foundation for his critique of historical reason. However, Dilthey’s criticism reveals, in a negative fashion, the similarities between himself and Schopenhauer; what was missing from Schopenhauer’s vision was a *method*. It was only Schopenhauer’s lack of a clearly articulated

⁵³ Peter Lewis, *Arthur Schopenhauer* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2012) p. 141-168.

⁵⁴ *GS*, vol. 17, p. 390.

way of arriving at his conclusions that Dilthey found unsatisfying; the general philosophical orientation – the interpretation of life’s meaning and content – was precisely what Dilthey was attempting to construct a general philosophical-scientific method *for*.

From the year 1883, when he published his *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, to the year 1896, when Hermann Ebbinghaus criticized the very assumption that made Dilthey’s project possible, Dilthey attempted to do this. In his *Nachlass* can be found many false starts and beginnings of descriptions. Although these drafts range dramatically in scope and sustain, they all share a common goal: to explain the ‘narrative’ character of life and its interwovenness with general history that is found when one attempts to analyze the life of a historical figure. We must now proceed to what Dilthey was exactly trying to do with the *Einleitung*, so that we can appreciate both his ambition and how dramatically he would fail 13 years later.

The *Einleitung*

In 1882, Dilthey returned to the place he had completed his initial schooling, the University of Berlin, to succeed Hermann Lotze as Chair of Philosophy. Dilthey had, at this point, published a large number of articles and reviews, and was reasonably well-known for his biography of Schleiermacher; he was yet, however, to produce a major non-biographical work.⁵⁵ His appointment to the chair was presumably based off the expected publication of what was to be a massive overview and clarification of the contemporary state of the human sciences: the *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften* (“Introduction to the Human Sciences”). The same year as his appointment to the faculty at the University of Berlin, he wrote a letter – these days rather

⁵⁵ See Ulrich Hermann, *Bibliographie Wilhelm Dilthey: Quellen und Literatur* (Berlin: Verlag Julius Beltz, 1969) for a complete chronological list of works, both published and unpublished.

confusingly referred to as the “Althoff Letter” – describing his soon-to-be released project.⁵⁶

Here, Dilthey states his goals for his project more clearly than anywhere else up to that point, including the formal introduction in the *Einleitung* that would be published less than a year later.

According to the Althoff Letter, the *Einleitung* was at least partially intended to be exactly what its title suggests: an introduction, covering both the history and the methodology of the human sciences. However, Dilthey’s ultimate ambitions extended further than this. Dilthey had, since his inaugural lecture at the University of Basel in 1865, been advocating for the articulation of a *Grundwissenschaft* – a ‘foundational science.’ This foundational science – which Dilthey would eventually term both a psychology and an anthropology – was perhaps simpler than it sounds. The impetus for Dilthey’s call was a desire for a clarification and refinement of the common theoretical postulates held by the human sciences. Thus, the *Grundwissenschaft* was not a separate or unique science of its own, but the basic ‘science’ which all the more specialized sciences would hold in common. This process of clarification would show why the methods of the natural sciences, increasingly influential in the practices of the human sciences, were poorly suited for the job. The *Grundwissenschaft* was not intended to support a metaphysical system, which the human sciences would then supposedly flesh out. It was a foundational, but not a *final*, science. The findings of the human sciences would themselves be required to be turned back upon the *Grundwissenschaft* and modify it in turn. Ultimately, the goal was to provide theoretical postulates which could order and provide interpretative frameworks for the findings of the

⁵⁶ This ‘letter’ as it is found in the *Nachlass* is in fact a conglomeration of two different, incomplete drafts of a letter that were never sent. Georg Misch, Dilthey’s student, son-in-law, and first editor of his *Nachlass*, identified it as addressed to Friedrich Althoff, the head of the university department in the Prussian Ministry of Education; because of this, the letter is now almost universally referred to as the “Althoff Letter.” However, this has recently been disputed by Rudolf Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi; according to them, it bears strong resemblances to a letter that was actually sent to the general director of the Royal Museum of Berlin, Richard Schöne. See *GS*, vol. 19, p. 453.

human sciences. Thus, Dilthey's vision of philosophy was similar to the other neo-Kantians of his day: philosophy was to act as the handmaiden of the sciences.

The reason for Dilthey terming these common principles a 'psychology' also stemmed from his attempt to "move beyond [Kant],"⁵⁷ and his attempts to deal with Kant's legacy. As Dilthey said, in a most Kantian fashion: "It is the highest and most universal problem of all inquiry: In what form is the world given to us, a world which is there for us only in our perceptions and representations? Through what processes is constituted from the disparate and constantly in-streaming impulses which meet the senses the picture of the external world in which we live? And likewise out of inner intuitions the picture of the mental world?"⁵⁸ Dilthey conceived of his psychology in the broadest terms; quite literally, Dilthey wanted a 'logic' of the psyche. Already in 1865, Dilthey had echoed Novalis's call for an *Inhaltpsychologie*, or "content-psychology," so as to study the uniformities within the contents of mental states as they developed into each other.⁵⁹ Below, Dilthey's development of this psychology will be seen to have developed in constant tension with other psychologists.

Dilthey, although he does not distinguish them explicitly, includes three different tensions or conflicts that he evidently hoped would be resolved by his work. The first was the "opposition between historical empiricism and abstract theories of society"⁶⁰; the second was the "quarrel between idealism and realism"⁶¹, or the problem of the supposed gap between subject and object, which would be "resolved by psychological analysis" showing that "both self and the real world are... given in the totality of psychic life," meaning that "each exists in relation to the other, and

⁵⁷ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Westermanns illustrierte deutsche Monatshefte* 47. (1879) p. 125-126.

⁵⁸ *GS*, vol. 5, p. 12.

⁵⁹ *GS*, vol. 1, p. 380.

⁶⁰ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 493.

⁶¹ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 493.

is equally immediate and true,”⁶² and finally, the task which thence arose of “providing the underlying psychological state of affairs for the abstractions of traditional epistemology – time as a representational fact, cause, etc.,”⁶³ so that it could be shown that Dilthey’s ‘psychological analysis’ would, indeed, solve this problem. Thus, the “ultimate goal” of the newly elaborated logic of the human sciences contained in Dilthey’s project was to “settle the quarrel between abstract theories and historical consciousness, between the consciousness of our freedom and the causal connections and uniformities in the course of history.”⁶⁴

Evidently, Dilthey thought – or, surely, could only have hoped – that his book would essentially settle the biggest problems of 19th-century philosophy. However, Dilthey never finished the planned work; only the first volume of a planned three-volume series was ever published. The first book of the *Einleitung* is essentially dedicated to uncovering the proper methods for the investigation into socio-historical reality. This is, for Dilthey, the general object of study for the human sciences. Dilthey’s debts to both the Kantian rejection of ‘vulgar’ empiricism and the German Historical School’s anti-speculative method shine through brightly here; almost the entire first book is dedicated to a dual critique of both the positivist, natural-scientific methods of J.S. Mill and Auguste Comte, as well as the metaphysical, teleological approach of Hegel. These criticisms were clearly intended to be some of the theoretical postulates that a future *Grundwissenschaft* would hold.

Dilthey begins with a basic critique of the method of the ‘philosophy of history.’ He criticizes Hegel’s notion of ‘spirit,’ which manifests itself in the world and therefore can always be found behind every phenomenon, as well as Schleiermacher’s ‘reason,’ as being “abstract

⁶² *SW*, vol. 1, p. 494.

⁶³ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 494.

⁶⁴ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 496.

essences which condense the historical course of the world into colorless abstractions.”⁶⁵ Dilthey does not share Hegel’s teleological optimism, where history is a “series of ever more concrete determinations of freedom arising from the concept of freedom.”⁶⁶ Thus, for Dilthey the method of the philosophy of history disrespects the particularity and uniqueness of historical phenomena, considering them only the positive manifestation of an underlying teleological process.

Years later, in 1910, Dilthey would return to the problems posed by Hegel and write that: “The assumptions on which Hegel based this concept [objective spirit] can no longer be accepted today. Today, we have to start from the reality of life... Hegel engaged in metaphysical construction: we analyze what is given... we cannot treat objective spirit as an ideal construction: rather must we take as our basis its reality in history. We seek to understand this reality and to present it in adequate concepts.”⁶⁷ The world could not be understood as the emanations of a teleological ‘Spirit,’ but must instead be analyzed only as it has appeared in the world.

Dilthey then moves to the alternative option, what he calls ‘sociology,’ of which Dilthey considers Mill, and especially Comte, the foremost representatives of. Dilthey’s basic critique of this approach, perhaps surprisingly, is that they *do not do* precisely what Dilthey had just criticized the Hegelian school for *doing*; they do not consider the underlying forces which direct and constrain the positive phenomena which appear in historical study. That is, although they recognize, to their credit, that there is no singular shadowy force at work under the surface of history, which ‘emanates’ from within itself all the various particulars which exist in the

⁶⁵ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 154.

⁶⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Reason in History*, trans. Robert S. Hartman (IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), p. 78. Quoted from *SW*, vol. 1, p. 154.

⁶⁷ *GS*, vol. 7, p. 173.

historical process, they go too far; Comte especially “denies that lawful relations among psychic states can be studied by themselves.”⁶⁸

To their credit, Comte and Mill had seen that if the multivariate causes of history, which resulted in such varied and incongruent kinds of historical phenomena such as psychological neuroses, cultures, state institutions, art, economy, and philosophy, cannot be assumed to have a source outside the individual’s mind, then the only possible explanation for them would be in the individual’s psychology; it is from the individual in the world that ideas spring; individuals do not spring from ideas. However, Mill bases his psychology too much on the methods of the natural sciences. In defense of his own position, Mill wrote:

If there are some subjects [natural sciences] on which the results obtained have finally received the unanimous assent of all who have attended to the proof, and others [human sciences, especially psychology] on which mankind have not yet been equally successful... it is by generalizing the methods successfully followed in the former inquiries, and adapting them to the latter, that we may hope to remove this blot on the face of science.⁶⁹

Dilthey rejected this approach. In a passage that will be of exceptional importance for its foreshadowing of Dilthey’s later solutions, he claims that the “[Human] sciences have a wholly different foundation and structure than the natural sciences. Their subject matter is composed of units that are given rather than inferred – units that are understandable from *within*. Here we start with an *immediate* knowledge or understanding in order to gradually attain conceptual knowledge.”⁷⁰ This passage is important because it is the first time that Dilthey makes a hard distinction between two different ‘kinds’ of knowledge, and, furthermore, that there is a kind of knowledge that humans have, of a certain kind of object, that is immediate, and, therefore, that

⁶⁸ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 154.

⁶⁹ J.S. Mill, *A System of Logic*, (London: Longmans, Green, 1879), p. 418. Quoted in *SW*, vol. 1, p. 155.

⁷⁰ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 158. Emphasis mine.

the limit on knowledge imposed by mediating concepts does not apply to the *Geisteswissenschaften*. This means that objects of knowledge of a certain kind can be posited and known by the human sciences, and claimed to have been done so legitimately, that cannot be posited by the natural sciences.

Thus, the object of investigation of the human sciences – the foregrounded individual and how he is connected to the socio-historical world – requires a clarification and unification of its basic principles – a *Grundwissenschaft* – that bind together the theoretical presuppositions of a psychological analysis based on lived experience. An anthropologically informed psychology – which, for Dilthey, was the ‘science of experience’ – seemed best suited as a starting point for an analysis of objects that existed given immediately in experience. In the *Einleitung*, Dilthey spends a large amount of time writing about what the nature of this kind of psychological analysis might be. Alongside his criticisms of Mill and Comte’s natural scientific treatment of psychology, Dilthey develops some thoughts on his own vision of psychology, and how it can act as a *Grundwissenschaft* for the human sciences as a whole.

Proceeding analytically, there are three different aspects or claims that Dilthey needs to incorporate into his psychology in order to make it viable for his project. The first is that the psychology or mental content of the individual’s mind is wrapped up with his historical moment. This means that a properly historical psychology will look a lot like anthropology; indeed, Dilthey often uses the words together. As he says, “The theory of these psychophysical life-units is found in anthropology and psychology. The whole of history and life-experience provides the material of these sciences. And the results of studies of psychosocial movements will acquire a continually growing significance for them. A proper psychology must use the whole wealth of

facts which comprise the subject matter of the human sciences in general. This is a condition common to psychology, history, and the theories which we will discuss next.”⁷¹

An early question or concern one may have about this approach is its seemingly extreme individualism.⁷² Is it really true that the methods of, say, political science, which deals with questions of institutional action, large-scale social theory, or the nature of justice, all would have *psychology* as their foundation? Dilthey’s response is very simple; all he is doing is proceeding from the conclusion that there are no metaphysical forces which move history; there are only the actions of people in history. Although Hegel had complained that this view would make “the great events and manifestations... merely products of petty or powerful passions... so that history... sinks to the level of being... without ideal content,”⁷³ the simple fact was that for Dilthey the method which Hegel had adopted could not be properly scientific, because “it is an attempt to reach a level of synthetic knowledge for which we do not have the means at our disposal.”⁷⁴ Even the largest social and cultural shifts happen through the interactions of individuals, and a properly critical – in the Kantian sense – view of history cannot overstep its bounds and imply a historical metaphysic. That being said, Dilthey explicitly disavows taking this principle of individualism too far, so as to remove the psychology of men from the cultures and practices that they live through: “Now since psychology by no means contains all those facts that comprise the subject matter of the human sciences or (which is the same) all that experience allows us to apprehend in psychic units, it follows that the subject matter of psychology is only a portion of that which takes place in each individual. Accordingly, it is only by means of

⁷¹ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 81.

⁷² See Frederick Beiser, *Philosophy of Life*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023) p. 29-54.

⁷³ Quoted in Michael Ermarth, *Wilhelm Dilthey: The Critique of Historical Reason* (IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978) p. 144.

⁷⁴ *GS*, vol. 5, p. 36.

abstraction that psychology can be separated from the overall study of socio-historical reality, and it can be developed only through constant reference to that whole.”⁷⁵

The second claim that Dilthey makes arguing for the capacities of psychology to provide a foundation for the human sciences is that lived experience ‘just is’ historical experience: “Life is the fullness, variety, and interaction – within something continuous – experienced by individuals. Its subject matter is identical with history. At every point of history there is life, and history consists of life of every kind in the most varied circumstances. History is merely life viewed in terms of the continuity of mankind as a whole.”⁷⁶ The practice of history is, then, in a sense, already a kind of psychological exploration. “History is our most powerful means for giving voice to our inner life, for expression and explicating it,” he writes. “What human beings find in themselves they can see above all in history, which brings to light and to clear perception everything that exists in them. Self-reflection, as the foundation of knowledge, provides the most fundamental perspective on the *status humanitatis* and its effects on the way human beings regard knowledge and themselves. The human sciences in turn provide the most fundamental perspective on the essence of inner experience and humanity. That which we can see today we can define only approximately by keeping in mind what scientific self-reflection has seen. Only in this way can we determine the locus of our present self-reflection, and extend its scope. The vitality and freedom of self-reflection lies in its subjectivity; in short, its strength is also its weakness.”⁷⁷ What Dilthey’s psychology will do is reverse-engineer the process; because history is ‘giving voice to our inner life,’ an explication of the form and content of our inner life can reveal to us what is going on in history as we live it. ‘Universal history’ – whatever theoretical

⁷⁵ *SW*, vol. 1, p.81.

⁷⁶ *GS*, vol. 6, p. 57.

⁷⁷ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 439.

status of that might be – and the individual's life history are interwoven so closely, according to Dilthey, that they are discovered together, in the same moment of experience, so that the availability of one to analysis means the availability of the other.

Thus, the third and most ambitious claim of Dilthey's project is already implicit in the second: that self-reflection can penetrate the historical or meaningful content of the mind, analyze it, determine its antecedent states and the way it transforms itself – Dilthey does occasionally refer to these processions of content or mental states as being 'laws,' but he never pushes this point and more often refers to them as 'uniformities' or 'regularities' – and then, on the basis of knowledge of these uniformities, adjudicate questions of judgement in history. Dilthey quite clearly recognizes the importance of the ability to achieve this kind of complete self-reflection for his foundational project of overcoming relativism.

This is why, two pages from the end of the first book of Volume One, Dilthey writes the following passage: "Once critical consciousness exists, it is impossible for there to be first and second-order evidence or a first and second-order knower. Only that concept is complete from the logical standpoint which contains in itself a reference to its origin; only that proposition possesses certainty which derives from indisputable knowledge. From the critical standpoint, the logical requirements placed on a *concept* are met only when together with the cognitive framework in which the concept arises there is a consciousness of the knowing process by which the concept is formed, and when the concept's place is unequivocally determined for it within the system of signs that refer to reality. [Analogously,] the logical requirements placed on a *judgement* are satisfied only when the consciousness of its logical grounding in the cognitive framework in which it arises includes an epistemological clarity about the validity and significance of the whole nexus of psychic acts which constitutes this ground. Thus the logical

requirements for concepts and propositions lead back to the main problem of all epistemology: the nature of our immediate knowledge of the facts of consciousness and the relation of this knowledge to that which derives from the principle of sufficient reason.”⁷⁸ Dilthey’s ‘psychology’ is, then, in the end, precisely what he says it is; the process of understanding the development of a concept or judgement from its beginning in the coherency of psychic life.

The source for Dilthey’s confidence in the status of *Wissen* lies in what he referred to as the ‘principle of phenomenality’ (*Satz der Phenomenalität*). According to this principle, “Objects as well as acts of will – indeed, the whole immense external world as well as my self which differentiates itself from it – are, to begin with, lived experiences in my consciousness which I here refer to as ‘facts of consciousness’ (*Tatsachen des Bewusstseins*).”⁷⁹ According to Dilthey, “this universal relation to consciousness is the most general condition of everything which exists for us.”⁸⁰ One may mistakenly draw from this principle the conclusion that this ‘reduces’ the ‘real world’ to mere facts of consciousness. However, Dilthey is very explicit that he is not giving priority to mental states; in fact, he is doing just the opposite. “Insofar as I am able to reach the facts of consciousness through direct apprehension, the external world is given to me with as much immediacy as any mood or any exertion of the will. The one is thus as certain as the other from the impartial standpoint of lived experience. Indeed, from this standpoint, reflexive awareness of the act of perception does not in the least diminish the concreteness of the object of perception. Reflexive awareness of the act is something completely different from philosophical reflection, by virtue of which the object given in this act is recognized as a *mere*

⁷⁸ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 167.

⁷⁹ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 247.

⁸⁰ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 247.

fact of consciousness. A child or a laborer is as sure of the objects that surround him as of himself.”⁸¹

Crucially, Dilthey does consider the question of whether or not “the immediate evidentness of the facts of consciousness might not itself be derivative and thereby dependent on the conditions of thought.”⁸² However, in what seems to be nearly a kind of *mauvaise foi*, he retreats from the danger in the question, and provides a rather lackluster answer. He merely asserts that a negative answer to the question “corresponds to the truth,”⁸³ that “it can in fact be shown that knowledge of the reality of the facts of consciousness need not be gained by way of reasoning, but rather that we have an immediate knowledge of it,”⁸⁴ because “the distinction between what we experience and what we possess as representation or thought can at all times and in all cases be established through the observation of our own states. It is impossible to confuse one with the other...”⁸⁵ Thus, “the objection just raised against what we have claimed can be dispelled.”⁸⁶ Dilthey explicitly links this “immediate knowledge, self-sufficient and self-contained of the reality of the facts of consciousness,”⁸⁷ to the proper study of the socio-historical world; if the human sciences took this understanding of life as their starting point, “it would be not the evidentness of thought floating in the air that constitutes the foundation of the sciences, but rather reality, that full reality which is nearest and most important to us. We would have the prospect of making the achievements of thinking intelligible on the basis of this immediate knowledge of reality.”⁸⁸

⁸¹ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 258.

⁸² *SW*, vol. 1, p. 274.

⁸³ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 274.

⁸⁴ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 274.

⁸⁵ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 301.

⁸⁶ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 274.

⁸⁷ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 274.

⁸⁸ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 274.

Dilthey refers to what is discovered by *Wissen*, what he takes to be the proper ‘understanding of experience,’ as *Erlebnis*. In order to properly explicate this concept, we must first see how Dilthey developed these ideas in the battlefields of the psychology of the day.

Dilthey and the Psychologists

Dilthey’s ‘descriptive psychology’ has garnered much confusion for primarily two reasons: the degree to which it departs from the existent psychology of his time, and the character of what it is supposed to be investigating. He elaborated his ‘descriptive’ psychology primarily in contradistinction to what he saw as the dominant research paradigm of psychology in Germany during the first fifty years of its practice: ‘explanatory’ psychology. Dilthey’s complaints against explanatory psychology derived directly from his basis in the German Idealist tradition. Chief among these complaints were as follows: firstly, the dangers of psychological reductionism; secondly, explanatory psychology’s purely formal analysis of psychic relations; and thirdly, explanatory psychology’s atomistic isolation of the individual from the total social-historical process. Although Dilthey had these doubts about psychology from as early in his career as 1865, he still insisted on the possibility of reforming psychology as a discipline away from its positivistic emphasis, into a discipline that could analyze the developmental process of the content of the mind.

His efforts in this direction reached their end in 1894; that year, he attempted to formulate the basic spirit of his psychological project as clearly as he could, in a paper entitled *Ideen über eine beschreibende und zergliedernde Psychologie* (“Ideas on a Descriptive and Analytic Psychology”). Dilthey’s close friend and colleague at the University of Berlin, the psychologist

Hermann Ebbinghaus, severely criticized the paper, precisely on the theoretical point which Dilthey was resting his hopes for psychology's possibility of acting as a *Grundwissenschaft*: the possibility of psychological introspection, or what he sometimes referred to as 'self-observation' (*Selbstbeobachtung*). After this criticism, Dilthey would change gears and attempt to ground the *Geisteswissenschaften* in a theory of *Verstehen*, or 'understanding,' but he would never again discover a method by which a truly objective form of historical reason could be grounded.

We must first establish the character of psychology at its inception in the German university system as Dilthey described it in the *Ideen*. The field was primarily united by a desire to import the empirical exactness of the natural sciences into the study of the mind. This general ethos was, in fact, perhaps the only thing which united the field in its initial years; while in the field of philosophy the anti-materialist crusade of the neo-Kantians had been quite influential, psychology's methodological consensus lagged behind. That being said, the mandate for empiricism was loose enough that different practitioners of psychology could claim to be describing the mind empirically, and yet reach enormously different conclusions. Looking back on the recent history of the field, Dilthey described it as a "war of all against all, no less fierce than that in the field of metaphysics."⁸⁹ What united psychology in those early years was the general accession to the positivist spirit; whatever was to be accepted as 'objective' evidence would no longer be the logical deductions of the transcendental idealists, but only the empirical, external observations of the natural scientist. As we have seen, Dilthey had already criticized the English and French methods, represented by John Stuart Mill and August Comte, for this

⁸⁹ *SW*, vol. 2, p. 118.

restriction. In Germany, the first two major figures in the field were Gustav Fechner (1801-1887) and Hermann von Helmholtz (1821-1894).

Fechner and Helmholtz's "psycho-physics" represented the essence of the positivist spirit. For Fechner and Helmholtz, for every psychic act, there was a physical correlate in the brain which was the 'other side' of the content of this act. Their initial project was an attempt to develop a system of empirical laws concerning the play of the physical responses of the mind which could explain the formation of certain affects and sensations. Fechner published in 1860 what came to be seen as a kind of textbook for the still-nascent field: his *Elemente der Psychophysik* ("Elements of Psycho-Physics"). In it, 'psycho-physics' was defined as the science of the relationship between a "discrete cause in the 'objective' physical world" and its resultant "response in the 'subjective' mental realm of perception."⁹⁰ Fechner's biggest positive contribution in psychology lay in what became known as the Weber-Fechner Law, where he demonstrated that there was a definite correlation between "the physical intensity of a stimulus, and the corresponding psychological sensation."⁹¹ The positivist psychology of this school was intended to be founded entirely on an empirical study of the brain's physiology.

In Helmholtz, this radical vision of what was acceptable in the scientific treatment of the mind was extended even further. Helmholtz's background was in physics, and his intention was to treat the various psychic phenomena in much the same way a physicist would treat the most basic aspects of physical existence; his program was popularly referred to as 'psycho-physicalism.' In Dilthey's view, Helmholtz was "the embodiment of the natural scientific spirit of

⁹⁰ Michael Ermarth, *Wilhelm Dilthey: The Critique of Historical Reason* (IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978) p. 76.

⁹¹ R. E. Fancher, *Pioneers of Psychology – A History* (NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), p. 163.

the time.”⁹² Under Helmholtz’s definition of psychology, psychological explanations could only make use of the physiological impulses present under observation; the actual content of the thinking mind was removed from consideration. Dilthey’s attempt to found a ‘Critique of Historical Reason’ rested on the ability for thought to analyze certain value-claims or ‘meaning-claims’ in history; a psychology which engaged only with the physiological aspects of the brain could not do this.

Dilthey had already privately criticized psychology for these failings fifteen years prior to the *Ideen*. In an unpublished essay of 1879 entitled “Empirie, nicht Empirismus,” Dilthey critiqued the Fechner-Helmholtz vision of psychology, writing that “psychology has up to now elaborated forms and laws of the psychic process, but the contents which in the first place determine the meaning of our existence are excluded from consideration.”⁹³ Evidently, Dilthey was in agreement with the general vein of empiricism (*Empirie*). But what had established itself as a broad ‘empirical movement’ (*Empirismus*) had a mistaken idea of what counted as valid empirical evidence.

The empiricist approach to psychology was continued on primarily by the legendary Wilhelm Wundt, a psychologist who Dilthey described as “the major founder and steward of empiricism in Germany.”⁹⁴ Wundt is sometimes referred to as the ‘father of experimental psychology’; he established the world’s first psychological laboratory in Leipzig in 1879, as well as the first academic journal exclusively dedicated to psychological research in 1883, *Philosophische Studien*.⁹⁵ Dilthey did see in Wundt a vast improvement beyond the extremely

⁹² *GS*, vol. 5, p. 30.

⁹³ *GS*, vol. 5, p. lxxvii.

⁹⁴ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Westermanns Illustrierte deutsche Monatshefte* 52. (1882) p. 525.

⁹⁵ Jochen Fahrenberg, *Wilhelm Wundt: 1832-1920: Introduction, Quotations, Receptions, Commentaries, Attempts at Reconstruction* (Lengerich: Pabst Science Publishers, 2019).

limited natural-scientific methods of Herbart and Fechner; Wundt was a step away from *Empirismus*, and a step toward proper *Empirie*. Dilthey believed this primarily for two reasons.

Firstly, Wundt attempted to go beyond the isolated, atomistic treatment of psychic phenomena by treating them instead as possessing an inherently relational existence, where every psychic phenomena could only be understood by reference to the larger structure of mind. “Indeed, Wundt revived the older Kantian notion of apperception to account for the manner in which new perceptions are integrated into individual consciousness. Thus, the ‘self’ which had largely been banished from psychology in fulfillment of the positivist demand to pare away unnecessary hypothetical and ‘fictive’ constructs, was reintroduced to explain mental life.”⁹⁶ As Wundt put it:

When I initially started to work on psychological problems, I shared the general prejudice to which physiologists were prone, namely, that the formation of sense perceptions is solely the work of the physiological characteristics of our sense organs. It was in the achievements of vision that I first learned to grasp the act of creative synthesis, which gradually guided me in attaining a psychological understanding of the development of the higher Imaginate and intellectual functions, for which the older psychology had offered no help whatsoever.⁹⁷

Wundt’s notion of a concrete self which all psychological phenomena must be understood in relation to, was echoed by Dilthey’s insistence on ‘the whole.’ One of Dilthey’s most quoted maxims is that, in the study of both the historical world and in the study of psychology, ‘we begin with the whole and it is with the whole that we are constantly concerned.’ Whereas previous psychologists had started from isolated nerve-endings or sense-impressions and then attempted to see how they fit together schematically, Wundt and Dilthey both recognized that the

⁹⁶ Michael Ermarth, *Wilhelm Dilthey: The Critique of Historical Reason* (IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978) p. 76.

⁹⁷ Wilhelm Wundt, *Human and Animal Psychology*, trans. J.E. Creighton and E.B. Titchener (NY: MacMillan & Co., 1896) p. 447.

meaning-content of psychic life could not be explained entirely by physiological processes. Wundt, more than the previous generation of psychologists, had recognized “what is free and creative in psychic life.”⁹⁸ This being said, as we will shortly see, they did not share the same vision of what it meant to ‘refer to the whole.’

Secondly, Wundt also argued that the cultural and social influences on the mind had to be considered by psychological analysis. “In addition to laboratory responses, Wundt insisted that cultural products and symbols... were legitimate subject matter for psychology.”⁹⁹ Wundt had, early in his career, been attracted to the *Völkerpsychologie* of Mortiz Lazarus and Heymann Steinthal. In 1912, Wundt would describe the needs for psychology to understand the social constitution of the self *over time*: “...it is erroneous to assume that children’s psychology could solve the ultimate problems of psychogenesis. In a cultivated society, the child is surrounded by influences that can never be separated from what spontaneously emerges in the child’s consciousness. In contrast, *Völkerpsychologie* demonstrates real psychogenesis by means of observing the different stages of mental development, which mankind is still undergoing even today.”¹⁰⁰ However, despite the fact that Wundt had improved upon the empiricism of Fechner and Helmholtz, he still postulated hypotheses that could not be verified by direct experience. Therefore, he had not yet developed a ‘descriptive psychology.’

The neo-Kantians of the Baden School, Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert, who had already criticized psychology’s ‘psychologizing’ of mental life, had based their critiques precisely on this ‘explanatory’ methodological preference. Under Windelband’s definition of the

⁹⁸ *SW*, vol. 2, p. 142.

⁹⁹ Michael Ermarth, *Wilhelm Dilthey: The Critique of Historical Reason* (IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978) p. 77.

¹⁰⁰ Wilhelm Wundt, *Elemente der Völkerpsychologie: Grundlinien einer Psychologischen Entwicklungsgeschichte der Menschheit* (Leipzig: Alfred Kröner, 1913) p. 4.

natural sciences as ‘rule’ or ‘law’ making – the spirit of explanatory psychology which Wundt had carried on from Herbart and Fechner – psychology was indeed a natural science.¹⁰¹ In the face of – from the point of view of the Kantian tradition – the necessary freedom of the individual will, the entire enterprise of an ‘explanatory’ psychological approach was misguided. Dilthey shared the neo-Kantians’ concerns with psychology’s propensity for explanatory theories: “Every explanatory theory is an abstraction that truncates and mutilates the whole state of affairs. If I begin with representations and project an atomism of representational life (perhaps supplemented by elements of feeling), then unity, self-consciousness, and the spontaneous consciousness of activity become appearances.”¹⁰² What Dilthey required from psychology was an investigation into how certain psychological contents or states were connected with others and how it produced certain patterns of thought. He did not admit necessary causal-physical laws, nor did he search for them; his psychology was about reconstructing how psychic states were derived from each other exclusively through an introspective analysis.

Although Wundt had made a decisive step beyond the atomistic approach of the earlier explanatory psychologists, Dilthey believed that Wundt still fell under the mistaken pretension of modern psychology towards a ‘constructive’ or ‘synthetic’ approach. This was due to an unsustainable vision of the self that Wundt offered. Wundt started from the whole, but he started from a ‘constructed’ whole, not the whole of consciousness that was actively given in self-conscious and therefore certain. The only self that was available to act as a basis for psychological investigation was the self that underwent ‘lived experience’ (*Erlebnis*). For Dilthey, “what one must demand of psychology and what constitutes the core of its particular

¹⁰¹ Windelband spelled this out explicitly in 1894, the same year Dilthey published his *Ideen*, when he gave his rectoral address titled “Geschichte und Naturwissenschaft” at the University of Strassburg. See Wilhelm Windelband, “History and Natural Science,” trans. Guy Oakes, *History and Theory* 19, no. 2 (1980), p. 169.

¹⁰² *SW*, vol. 1, p. 290.

method point us in the same direction... By descriptive psychology I understand a science that explicates constituents and their connections in terms of a single nexus that appears uniformly in all mature human psychic life – a ‘*Zusammenhang*’ (either ‘nexus’ or ‘coherency’) *that is not inferred or postulated, but experienced*. This psychology is thus the description and analysis of a nexus that is *originally and always given as life itself*... This psychology is about the regularities inherent in the nexus of mature psychic life.”¹⁰³ Even though Wundt had done well to recognize the essentially anthropological nature of the psyche, he differed from previous constructivist or explanatory psychologists only by the recognition that his constitutive atomized units were historical and social in character. A static approach like that of Wundt’s had to construct a vision of the self which was a fiction; the very hallmark of the explanative approach.¹⁰⁴ Wundt had to posit an ideal substance to coordinate the various psychic phenomena; Dilthey insisted, when treating the ‘whole’ of the mind, what was key was to “not assume that this self is a substance. Indeed, the concept of substance is derived from this fact.”¹⁰⁵ The only ‘self’ that could be postulated was the ‘nexus’ or ‘coherency’ that presented itself in active thought; in other words, “...what is psychic is always in process.”¹⁰⁶

One should take note here of Dilthey’s language. Dilthey is insistent that for psychology to be descriptive, and therefore not to rely on anything but what is given in experience, *nothing can be allowed to be postulated*. Everything must be ‘given.’ Already we are seeing some tensions within his project. How can there be a unit called ‘life’ that logic, time, etc., are *derived* from, that need not be postulated? This is the true radicality of Dilthey’s project. For every

¹⁰³ *SW*, vol. 2, p. 127. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰⁴ “A limited number of univocally defined elements from which all of the phenomena of psychic life can supposedly be constructed: that is the capital with which explanative psychology works.” *SW*, vol. 2, p. 134.

¹⁰⁵ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 349.

¹⁰⁶ *SW*, vo. 2, p. 170.

mental phenomenon one may put forward to refute him, Dilthey is going to have to argue that it derives from a further phenomenon that one must pass through first in order to arrive at these more distilled forms. In taking this kind of approach, Dilthey was inspired and supported by a different kind of psychology that was emerging at the same time that Dilthey was formulating these ideas.

In explicit opposition to the explanatory school of psychology, another school of German psychology was emerging, which was not concerned with the ‘explanation’ of the mind but instead its ‘description.’ It did not attempt to find necessary laws of thought, but only to describe the interactions of psychic states as they could be observed by introspection. By doing this, it could expand its approach beyond mere psycho-physiological measurements and include the emotional or affective contents of psychic life as it is lived. This approach was given its first sophisticated articulation by a former classmate of Dilthey’s at the University of Berlin, Franz Brentano. Brentano’s most comprehensive exposition of this project, his *Psychologie von empirischen Standpunkt* (“Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint”) was published in 1874.

Eight years prior, in 1866, Brentano, like Fechner and Helmholtz, had proclaimed in his habilitation thesis that “the true method of philosophy is none other than that of natural science.”¹⁰⁷ However, Brentano, like Dilthey, found the reduction of psychological phenomena to physiognomic impulses to be unacceptable. What they lacked was a “preliminary clarification of its fundamental concepts”; the isolated phenomena that the explanatory psychologists had identified as the most basic psychic building blocks – be they isolated sensations, brain waves, or whatever – were themselves speculative entities that could not be found in an individual’s

¹⁰⁷ Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement* (MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994) p. 31.

experience. Here we see again the recurring conflict between the positivist spirit of the mid-19th century in Germany and those who reacted against it: what counted as acceptable empirical evidence? Where ought the researcher begin? Brentano believed that psychology must begin with psychic phenomena *as they were experienced*, and could proceed to explanation only after having completed a full classification of the various phenomena experienced. In the beginning of his *Psychologie*, Brentano wrote: “My standpoint in psychology is empirical: Experience alone is my teacher.”¹⁰⁸

Obviously, Brentano and Dilthey shared similar ideas regarding where psychology ought to take its point of departure from. However, the really *new* path that Brentano was carving out, which clearly inspired Dilthey, came from his doctrine of ‘intentionality.’ Here is how it was presented by Brentano: “Every psychical phenomenon is characterized by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or sometimes the mental) inexistence of an object, and what we should like to call, although not quite unambiguously, the reference (*Beziehung*) to a content, the directedness (*Richtung*) toward an object... or immanent objectivity (*immanente Gegenständlichkeit*). Each contains something as its object, though not each in the same manner.”¹⁰⁹ Dilthey understood Brentano to be elaborating a certain conviction regarding the nature of mental life that Dilthey himself had long held: the fact that mental life is always directed towards objects or the outside world, that consciousness is always lived as being wrapped up with the object world. The general idea is that we do not simply experience objects as pure sense-sensation, but that we have a certain relation to, and feelings about, objects in such a way that they are ‘pre-given’ to us; we experience a white desk not as an infinite variety of

¹⁰⁸ Franz Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, trans. Linda L. McAlister (NY: Routledge, 1995) p. xxv.

¹⁰⁹ Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement* (MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994) p. 36.

sense-sensations, but as a ‘white desk’; an object that figures into the already given totality of mental life.

However, what was even more important for Dilthey was the potential ‘empirical’ status that was being lent to that which was present in thought. *Erlebnis*, discovered simply by one’s awareness of it, was therefore a genuine and valid object of thought, even if it had an intentional ‘inexistence.’ Not only was it an object for thought, but Dilthey was going to attempt to show why it was immediately available, and therefore an object of knowledge gained by *Wissen*.

Brentano himself did not really intend for his doctrine of intentionality to be taken in this direction. He had elaborated it primarily to distinguish genuinely ‘psychic’ phenomena from ‘physical’ phenomena; in 1874, Brentano was still fighting the good fight against the reductionist psycho-physicalism of Fechner and Helmholtz. However, for anyone who had read Brentano – as there is significant evidence that Dilthey did – it was only a short step from Brentano’s doctrine of reference to a profound questioning of what *could* be referenced, and what the status of those ‘things that were referred to’ was. To be clear, Brentano was still attempting to bring a certain kind of empirical realism to the study of psychic life; in 1901, he began to lecture more stringently against the postulation of ‘fictitious entities’ or ‘*entia rationis*.’¹¹⁰ But the walls had been breached, and Brentano’s warnings concerning the potential misuse or misunderstanding of his doctrine came too late. Dilthey seems to have taken Brentano’s claim that “[intentional attitudes] can be truly said to ‘have objects’ even though they the objects which they can be said to have do not in fact exist,”¹¹¹ as further evidence for his distinction between *Wissen* and

¹¹⁰ Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement* (MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994) p. 43.

¹¹¹ Roderick Chisholm, “Intentional Inexistence”, in *The Nature of Mind*, ed. David M. Rosenthal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) p. 297.

Erkennen; that there were two different kinds of objects, which thus precipitated two different kinds of knowing.

The fact that they didn't 'exist out there' was no problem for Dilthey; he, like Kant, was simply 'deducing' necessary forms or organizing categories of thought. This was how he was going to avoid the supposed grandiose metaphysics of Hegel; rather than maintain the separation that Hegel maintained between the individual's existence and 'objective' spirit making its way in the world – this is how Reason, in Hegel's thought, can be said to operate 'above the heads' of individuals, or exist 'independently' of thinkers; a sentiment which, to Dilthey, stank of metaphysics and violated the limits of Brentano's doctrine of inexistence – he would collapse the moment of identification of the individual's life history and the universal history which is its context, so that the individual could be aware of the nature of the total historical process by being aware of the nature of his personal life history. Dilthey, according to the internal logic of his thought, was simply deriving the universal by investigation into the particulars.

Brentano's attempts at clarification were made several years after Dilthey had abandoned his psychological project – but Dilthey's project was one possible developmental path the phenomenological moment in Brentano would take. Dilthey saw in Brentano a method for examining the status of mental objects, and therefore as one of the potential seeds of a phenomenology of lived experience; a potential psychological method for tracking the historical formation for thought in life. Husserl's *Logische Untersuchungen* ("Logical Investigations") in 1900 merely took this possibility in another direction; but for Dilthey, Brentano had already taken a step towards providing "a rigorously logical and objective foundation for the 'standpoint of life and experience,' which had hitherto been largely couched in terms of religious or poetic

sentiment, as in Schleiermacher, Goethe, and the *Lebensphilosophen*.”¹¹² Those aspects of *Erlebnis* which could not necessarily be demonstrated according to the strict standards of natural science were still pertinent objects of study for the human sciences; intentional objects are simply and irreducibly “the awareness of something that is, something that exists, or, more accurately, something that offers itself and presents itself to one.... They cannot be dissolved into the subjective actions through which we enter into relation with them.”¹¹³

Although Dilthey did not accept Brentano’s ideas uncritically – Brentano would eventually proceed ‘too quickly’ towards classification, resulting in a division of the process of thought that Dilthey ironically called “sheer fiction”¹¹⁴ – this notion of intentionality was precisely how Dilthey intended to achieve his goal as stated in the Althoff Letter of reconciling idealism and materialism. All ‘subjective’ life was always object-driven; the ‘objective world’ was always already there in the ‘lived unity’ of life, and intentionality always had a ‘real content’ to it.

The last substantive theoretical encounter Dilthey had with a prominent psychologist came quickly on the heels of the publication of his *Ideen* in 1894. This encounter was with Dilthey’s close friend and colleague, Hermann Ebbinghaus; it would result in a blow to Dilthey’s psychological project so severe that Dilthey would eventually abandon it. However, before we can understand why Ebbinghaus’s criticism was so exacting, we must attempt to piece together as much as we can what Dilthey really meant by *Erlebnis*, or ‘lived experience.’ This concept, as we have seen, was the central category which produced all the divisions between him and his

¹¹² Michael Ermarth, *Wilhelm Dilthey: The Critique of Historical Reason* (IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978) p. 202.

¹¹³ Rüdiger Safranski, *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*, trans. Ewald Osers (MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 24.

¹¹⁴ *GS*, vol. 18, p. 139.

contemporaries. He had complained that Windelband and Rickert had reversed the proper state of affairs, and derived life from knowledge, while complaining that the psychologists had either ignored its significance, or, if they had recognized its significance, misunderstood its character. For Dilthey, it was the primordial philosophical ground from whence all thought came and the common object of study for the *Geisteswissenschaften*. Dilthey saw the standpoint of *Erlebnis* as the key to a common method which could unite them, and therefore a bulwark against the rapidly encroaching natural sciences. It is to this central concept that we now turn our attention.

The Determinate Concept of *Erlebnis*

In beginning a more focused discussion of ‘lived experience,’ or *Erlebnis*, it might be useful to recall Dilthey’s original position as he had formulated it in the Althoff Letter; it is notable how clear Dilthey was concerning the fundamental requirements and goals of his project. As he had formulated it there, “All science, all philosophy is experiential. All experience derives its coherence and its corresponding validity from the context of human consciousness. The quarrel between idealism and realism can be resolved by psychological analysis, which can demonstrate that the real world given in experience is not a phenomenon in my representation; it is rather given to me as something distinct from myself, because I am a being that does not merely represent, but also wills and feels. The real world is what the will possesses in reflexive awareness when it meets resistance or when the hand feels pressure. This reflexive awareness of the will is as much of this real world as of itself. Both self and the real world are therefore given

in the totality of psychic life. Each exists in relation to the other, and is equally immediate and true.”¹¹⁵

Here, we already get the majority of the basic points that Dilthey will attempt to incorporate into his notion of lived experience: the experiential beginning of all knowledge; the importance of the will or drives (basically analogous to what Dilthey has already discussed as being an essential aspect of the interpretation of phenomenon within a society, namely, *Zweck* or ‘purpose’); the ‘reality’ of the content given in ‘reflexive awareness’; and the existence of an underlying unity between subject and object – the status of which being exactly what is under question – from which these categories are derivative, rather than constitutive. Most importantly, however, is that Dilthey is positing this original subject-object unity as *immediate*. It is the ground from which we derive the concepts of subject and object, through which we gain an immediate, unconceptualized knowledge of the ‘real.’ This unity, and the form it takes – *Erlebnis* – is the domain of *Wissen*.

The best place to start a proper conceptual unfolding is in Dilthey’s initial criticism of the classic subject-object divide. Dilthey will take a similar approach that the radicalizers of Kant and Fichte – Hölderlin, Schelling, and Hegel – had approximately eighty years prior; that the categories of subject and object are derived from some prior unity between the two opposing positions.¹¹⁶ To Dilthey, “The inversion is clear enough. Subject and object in their opposition are not able to explain self-consciousness, for they *presuppose* self-consciousness, or what is constitutive of self-consciousness, namely, the connection of self and will...”¹¹⁷ Then, in language that begins to differentiate himself from the classical critique, he goes on to say that,

¹¹⁵ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 493.

¹¹⁶ Terry Pinkard, *Hegel: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) p. 134.

¹¹⁷ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 338.

“Being-for-oneself as reflexive awareness is the simple nature of the psychic process insofar as this is not mere absorption in an *object*, but *lived experience*. It is the foundation of what we call life as such, its most primordial seed, and at the same time it contains the formative law of self-consciousness. This reflexive awareness, in which an individual possesses his own states, can also be termed self-feeling, though it includes more, as the term indicates. This fact contains the core of self-consciousness.”¹¹⁸ Dilthey equates ‘being-for-oneself’ with the previously mentioned reflexive awareness; that is, what it means to have one’s own existence brought into view is to be reflexively aware of oneself. For Dilthey, this is the ‘core of self-consciousness.’

Dilthey clarifies – in his own way – what he means by this in a crucial fragment entitled “The Unity of Self-Consciousness and the Psychic Act.” The first part of the fragment is as follows: “If we reflect on our present psychic state, it appears as a continuous stream. Contents succeed one another in the changing relations of consciousness. The continuum of these contents, which is built up throughout our whole life, I call the objective ‘nexus’ (*Zusammenhang*). It stands in a complex relation to our self, and is available to consciousness only indirectly through reproduction.”¹¹⁹ So, what reflexive awareness finds *most immediately* is a unified stream of consciousness, with mental contents following each other seamlessly. Dilthey here is incorporating what he had elsewhere termed ‘temporality’ (*Zeitlichkeit*) as an absolutely

¹¹⁸ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 338. Emphases mine.

¹¹⁹ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 318. This is perhaps the appropriate place to note that almost all commentators on Dilthey translate this term *Zusammenhang* as ‘nexus.’ This is, indeed, a possible construal, but I feel that it underemphasizes the *temporal* unity that is intended, in favor of emphasizing the *structural* unity of the mind. I believe the English term ‘nexus’ is used because it does, indeed, better communicate the meaning of Dilthey’s *later* use of the term *Zusammenhang*, when he began to assign a much greater degree of importance to the concept of ‘structure,’ brought on by his rereading of William James’s *The Principles of Psychology* in the wake of Ebbinghaus’s criticism. I myself believe that another possible translation of *Zusammenhang*, i.e., ‘coherency,’ perhaps better conveys what Dilthey had intended; however, in order to not invite confusion or accusations of obfuscation or intentional misrendering of terms, I have used the more common translation.

fundamental characteristic; it is not simply a ‘structural’ psychic totality or nexus, but a coherent, *temporal* whole.

He goes on: “From this objective nexus I distinguish another nexus, located in a single moment abstracted from the temporal flow of consciousness: I take a cross section of consciousness to locate this second nexus, which of course remains only a part of the first nexus. This second nexus exists when I distinguish between two colors, or estimate the distance between two points in space, or step out of the way of someone approaching me, etc.”¹²⁰ This ‘second’ nexus is the unity of apperception as we typically understand it. Another, more extreme example that Dilthey could’ve given is simply staring at a wall. There is a unity here too – as Husserl later gave sharp formulation of, we are always ‘aware of’ or ‘directed towards’ some content – but it is a unity *already* once removed from the more basic, all-encompassing temporal unity of consciousness or ‘lived experience.’ That is why the static subject-object unity that Husserl would investigate as a potential basis for scientific certainty is only a ‘cross-section’ of a more basic form required: *Erlebnis*.

Dilthey is insistent that these cross-sections are only ever abstractions, abstractions that rather brutally tear away small pieces of a broader whole so as to subject them to the closest scrutiny. But the philosophical problems we run into from, for example, the subject-object distinction, only appear *because* of the brutality of the process of isolation; we find unexplainable tears at the edges of the conceptual problem, rips that we find inexplicable, apparently having forgotten that we ourselves had just created them by tearing them away from where they lay: “In every given moment of life we are conscious of this kind of relation of

¹²⁰ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 318.

contents, rather than of a single simple content. These relations disappear into a nexus at the fringe of consciousness: colors fade in the visual field; the representation of an action merges into a life-nexus (*Lebenszusammenhang*); the representation of sameness dissolves into the nexus of objects and figures, on the one hand, and into relations of consciousness, on the other. Thus the course of psychic life as given in the flow of time can only manifest one relative [representation] as it disappears and another as it begins to appear. It is this that constitutes the continuity of the psychic life-process. If only one representation were before our consciousness at any given time, psychic life would be intermittent. There would be an interval between the decline of one representation and the rise of another. One could say that this minimal interruption would not be perceived. However, this interruption or interval would at the same time be an interruption of consciousness itself. For a consciousness without something of which it is conscious can be nothing other than a motion without something moving...¹²¹

Dilthey locates the source for this temporal unity or ‘objective nexus’ as being a result of a synthesis, present in all consciousness. “The continuity of psychic life is thus given in the fact that in the smallest moment of time, let us say in every present, there occurs in consciousness a synthesis whose elements point both backwards and forwards to an objective nexus that encompasses what we know and do. The concept of this objective nexus can be fully developed only when we move beyond the present practice of abstracting from self-consciousness, and include self-consciousness in our investigation.”¹²² This ‘objective nexus’ is referred to by Dilthey as such not, of course, because it exists outside our minds or apparatuses of experience,

¹²¹ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 318.

¹²² *SW*, vol. 1, p. 318.

but because it is a part or requirement of all consciousness; therefore it is *given* in consciousness, but can never be discovered *apart* from more basic contents.

Still in the same fragment, Dilthey refers to this distinction as one between ‘process’ – or what, in a different jargon, might be termed ‘form’ – and ‘content’: “In the stream of our life which rushes by ceaselessly and all too rapidly, what does the psychic act amount to. Is there such a thing as a single psychic act that can be delimited within this continuity of life?”

We distinguish between the psychic process and its content. On the basis of this distinction, one and the same fact can be designated, on the one hand, as a psychic process, and on the other, as a content. This distinction must be grounded in the psychic fact itself. We have been able to establish that the psychic process contains a content. But that there is a *psychic process as distinct* from the content, from the object that I perceive, we know abstractly by means of conscious reflection on the facts of consciousness.”¹²³ Although Dilthey is insistent that there are no *a priori* values, what he articulates here as a ‘psychic process as distinct from the content’ must be intended to be basically analogues to Kant’s *a priori* categories of thought, especially because he wants it to be simply given or apparent.¹²⁴ This ‘process’ is intended to be the ‘form’ of history.¹²⁵ Dilthey, then, though he had said that “the *a priori* of Kant [was] fixed

¹²³ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 318.

¹²⁴ Commentators have disagreed on this: some have argued that Dilthey is postulating a “synthetic tendency of experience, whereby it apprehends reality in integrated accomplishments,” See Ermarth, *Wilhelm Dilthey*, p. 117, and p. 232. Others have argued that Dilthey is “only reaffirming an old Kantian theme: that the human intellect is discursive and analytical, because it has to begin from the parts and only gradually and fallibly reconstructs the whole...” See Frederick Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition*, p. 356. I hope it is clear that I believe Dilthey held the former. The question here is whether or not *Erlebnis* is merely an interpretation of life (and therefore little help) or is a genuine, fundamental epistemological principle (which would provide another inch of certainty when interpreting other minds or cultures). This being said, how there could be “in consciousness a synthesis whose elements point both backwards and forwards to an objective nexus that encompasses what we know and do,” a synthesis which is ‘more than Kant’s unity of apperception,’ without it restoring the transcendental plane that he had castigated the neo-Kantians for postulating, is a mystery; but I cannot read Dilthey as arguing for anything less than that.

¹²⁵ For more on what is meant by ‘History’ here, see Michael Rosen, “Die Geschichte,” in *Handbuch Deutscher Idealismus*, ed. Hans Jörg Sandkühler (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2005), p. 14-16. Rosen identifies, as the three most

and dead,” must himself posit an immediate identity between the forms of thought of the mind and the form of historical development; his living concept of ‘life’ was itself a fixed capacity of the mind. Dilthey, in this way, is a genuine inheritor of the Idealist tradition; though it might have fallen from its previous heights, there were still those who attempted to live amongst its ashes.

One can find Dilthey relying on this identity between the individual life and history elsewhere as well, most pointedly in a lecture called *Dichterische Einbildungskraft und Wahnsinn* (“Poetic Imagination and Madness”). Again referring to the ‘objective nexus’ – although here it is termed ‘acquired psychic nexus’ (*erworbener seelischer Zusammenhang*) – he insists that it “consists not merely of contents, but also of connections that have been produced among those contents. The connections are just as real as the contents.”¹²⁶ Because, according to Dilthey, the connections are ‘just as real as the contents,’ the uniformities in change between mental states are as observable as the content of those mental states themselves. The form, or ‘process,’ as Dilthey refers to it, acts on the contents and incorporates them into the life-history of the individual. In the same lecture, Dilthey admits that “the particular components of this nexus are not clearly conceived and not distinctly delineated, nor are the relations between them raised to bright consciousness.”¹²⁷ Nonetheless, “we are in possession of this acquired nexus and it is active. That which is present in consciousness is oriented towards it, as well as bounded, determined, and grounded by it.”¹²⁸ Rudolf Makkreel has phrased the interaction thusly: “The acquired psychic nexus is more than the sum of our conscious representations with which earlier

central aspects of *Geschichte* in traditional Idealism, intelligibility, necessary stages, and development (normally towards ‘maturity’). At least the first and third of these three aspects are clearly intended by Dilthey.

¹²⁶ *GS*, vol. 6, p. 143.

¹²⁷ *GS*, vol. 6, p. 143.

¹²⁸ *GS*, vol. 6, p. 143.

theories of apperception were concerned... Apperception renders present experience conscious and in turn assimilates it to the totality of our conscious representations.”¹²⁹

There are still other places where Dilthey argues for the reality of the connectedness of one’s ‘life-history.’ Still in his *Nachlass*, one finds Dilthey writing that, “Through this common basic character in virtue of which all these memories are cross sections of the lived experiences of one and the same self, there already exists an inner connection between them. Because the imagination can freely create connections and relations between the nearest and farthest of these homogenous formations, a lively consciousness of their nexus comes about.” However, Dilthey is then adamant that this is not enough; he insists that there is a *singular*, always present, coherent nexus, not merely independent reflections that recreate the nexus each time: “But this would still give only a series of glimpses of an ego that finds itself, first in one way, then in another, as the unity of various actions stemming from moments of life far removed from one another, if a heavier and stronger thread of a more durable fabric did not exist.”¹³⁰ The content of the acquired psychic nexus helps determine how new content or experiences are assimilated, but always under the rule of the general form of *Erlebnis*.

Dilthey argues in the second book of the *Einleitung* that it was a misrecognition on the part of earlier philosophers of this fundamental aspect of mental life – the existence of a ‘thread’ independent of one’s immediate awareness, but which is supposedly nevertheless necessary for one’s having any awareness at all – that led to the historical belief in the possibility of metaphysics.¹³¹ However, what is eventually going to come up as the central issue for Dilthey is how one has immediate consciousness of this thread if it must be *remembered*, or *constructed*.

¹²⁹ Rudolf Makkreel, *Dilthey: Philosopher of the Human Studies* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975) p. 98.

¹³⁰ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 345.

¹³¹ *SW*, vol. 1, p. 218.

One would not need to have to assemble the general from the particulars at all if it was given in the way Kant's synthetic unity of apperception was given. This problem is going to show up as the exact point of weakness that Hermann Ebbinghaus will push on. Kant deduced the categories, but believed that beyond that, one could not go; they were the most basic organizing categories of thought. Dilthey, to prove the presence of *Erlebnis*, is going to have to do precisely what Kant said could not be done; to reach beyond the simplest categories of space and time and enter into the realm of meaning or content, without becoming speculative.

Dilthey is, in some way, attempting to bring history itself *into* the individual mind. To see why he is having so much difficulty doing so, consider, for a moment: when one examines one's consciousness, where does one actually *find* history? In the sense that the Idealists meant history, the answer is: nowhere. As already described, one of the motivating factors behind *Lebensphilosophie* was a kind of disillusionment with what Reason could do. After it was decided that Hegel's speculative teleology was insufficiently grounded, the claim was lowered; the only totality that was felt to be able to be captured by reason in concepts was one's own life.¹³² Thus, the claims of philosophy were now to focus on a different, more modest object. Dilthey is trying to maintain Reason's claims within and over history by placing history directly within the totality of life, and then philosophically determining the limits of that totality. Now, we must see how this rather cunning attempt to let Reason reassume its lordship over the totality of existence came to fail.

The Ideen and Ebbinghaus's Critique

¹³² Herbert Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany 1831-1933*, trans. Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) p. 139-160.

The *Ideen über eine beschreibende und zergliedernde Psychologie* was first delivered as a lecture to the Prussian Academy of Science in February 1894.¹³³ Later that fall, it would be published in the academy's journal, *Sitzungsberichte*. In it, Dilthey put forward many of the criticisms that we discussed already; namely, he criticized what he considered the predominant mode of psychology at the time – what he called ‘explanatory psychology’ – for not being able to account for the content of mental states, as well as for putting forward various hypothetically hypostasized mental entities that could never be verified by experience. In contrast to this prevailing method, Dilthey advocated for a purely ‘descriptive’ psychology. However, the degree to which Dilthey successfully limited himself to merely ‘describing’ the mind was exactly what would be called into question by Hermann Ebbinghaus.

Hermann Ebbinghaus (1850-1909) was a professor of psychology at Berlin from 1885 to 1894, having been appointed professor in recognition of his 1885 work *Über das Gedächtnis: Untersuchungen zur experimentellen Psychologie* (later published in English as ‘Memory: A Contribution to Experimental Psychology’). Ebbinghaus had been a great admirer of Gustav Fechner. In the years between Ebbinghaus receiving his PhD in 1873 – a critique of the concept of the unconscious - and completing his habilitation in 1880, he had picked up a copy of Fechner's *Elemente der Psychophysik* in a London second-hand book shop.¹³⁴ Fechner's influence on Ebbinghaus persisted thereon throughout his academic life; his 1902 work *Grundzüge der Psychologie* (“Principles of Psychology”) was dedicated to Fechner, with

¹³³ Christian Damböck, “WHAT IS DESCRIPTIVE PSYCHOLOGY? EBBINGHAUS'S 1896 CRITICISM OF DILTHEY REVISITED.” *HOPOS: The Journal of the International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science* 10, no. 1 (2020): p. 274–89.

¹³⁴ "Ebbinghaus, Hermann ." International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences. *Encyclopedia.com*. 15 Apr. 2024 <<https://www.encyclopedia.com>>.

Ebbinghaus writing that he “owed everything” to him.¹³⁵ Ebbinghaus shared with Fechner the conviction that psychology was *Naturwissenschaft*. Even in his dissertation, the first thesis he put forward was that “psychology (in the broadest sense) belongs no more to philosophy than does natural science.”¹³⁶ Ebbinghaus, then, although not explicitly referred to, was clearly one of the explanatory psychologists that Dilthey was criticizing in the *Ideen*.

When Ebbinghaus responded to Dilthey’s criticisms of his field, he countered with two different criticisms of his own. In 1896, Ebbinghaus published an article in the journal that he had previously cofounded in 1890 with Arthur König – the *Zeitschrift für Psychologie und Physiologie der Sinnesorgane*, which had, by 1896, become an exceptionally well-respected journal¹³⁷ - entitled *Über erklärende und beschreibende Psychologie* (“On Explanatory and Descriptive Psychology”). In it, Ebbinghaus responded to Dilthey in two different ways. His first rebuttal was the claim that Dilthey had completely misunderstood the character of contemporary psychology; he was attacking phantoms. Ebbinghaus admitted that the earliest forms of explanatory psychology did indeed suffer under delusions that the methods of physics could simply be imported to the study of the mind:

It is certain that the first form of modern scientific psychology, the so-called association psychology, did not come into the world with all the desired perfections, but suffered from certain fundamental deficiencies. This can be traced back to two roots: it had too much confidence in its powers in the theoretical handling of psychological facts, and it followed physical-chemical analogies too much. Both are understandable... And where, on the other hand, could she have gained a concrete view of the process of real and

¹³⁵ B.M. Thorne and T. B. Henley, *Connections in the History and Systems of Psychology* (NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2001) p. 209.

¹³⁶ "Ebbinghaus, Hermann ." International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences. *Encyclopedia.com*. 15 Apr. 2024 <<https://www.encyclopedia.com>>.

¹³⁷ Just in 1896, the *Zeitschrift* published papers by Wilhelm Wundt, Henri Bergson, William James, Carl Stumpf, Georg Simmel, Paul Natorp, and John Dewey, among many others.

fruitful science than in physics and chemistry, since biology of note had not yet been developed? However, understandable or not, the defects are there.¹³⁸

This being admitted, according to Ebbinghaus the explanatory psychologists no longer truly believed in the kind of primitive ‘associationism’ that Herbart had attempted so many decades ago; in fact, Herbart was no longer read at all, even in Germany.¹³⁹ Ebbinghaus was, at this point, quite the distinguished psychologist: he was extremely well-known, even outside Germany, for his studies on memory,¹⁴⁰ for establishing the third psychological lab in Germany at the University of Berlin,¹⁴¹ and for his founding and editing the *Zeitschrift*. Thus, his evaluation of the state of the discipline carried serious weight. However, it is also worth noting that he was seen by some others at the time as a particularly radical proponent of the ‘explanatory’ variant of psychology, and thus his characterization of the field as having completely moved on from the old paradigm may be seen as perhaps more effacing than totally historically accurate. After the publication of his critique, several other prominent intellectuals at the time wrote letters to Dilthey in support.¹⁴² In them, they remarked how Dilthey ought not worry too much about Ebbinghaus’s critique; that Dilthey had simply put his finger on a particularly sore spot, as Ebbinghaus was one of the guiltiest of those sins that Dilthey had exposed in modern psychology. Wundt, for example, wrote to Dilthey and reassured him that,

¹³⁸ Hermann Ebbinghaus, “Über erklärende und beschreibende Psychologie”, *Zeitschrift für Psychologie und Physiologie der Sinnesorgane* 9 (1896), p. 175.

¹³⁹ Hermann Ebbinghaus, “Über erklärende und beschreibende Psychologie”, *Zeitschrift für Psychologie und Physiologie der Sinnesorgane* 9 (1896), p. 186.

¹⁴⁰ Wilhelm Wundt’s student Edward Titchener described Ebbinghaus’s 1885 work on memory as “a work that might prove as important to experimental psychology even as Wundt’s *Physiologische Psychologie* or Brentano’s *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkte*.” See E. B. Titchener, “The past decade in experimental psychology,” *American Journal of Psychology* 21 (1910): p. 404-421.

¹⁴¹ "Ebbinghaus, Hermann ." International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences. *Encyclopedia.com*. 15 Apr. 2024 <<https://www.encyclopedia.com>>.

¹⁴² These intellectuals included Count Paul Yorck von Wartenburg, Alois Riehl (a neo-Kantian philosopher who had overseen Heinrich Rickert’s *habilitation*), Richard Falckenburg, (a historian of philosophy), and Wilhelm Wundt.

while reading Ebbinghaus's critique, he was "taking into account the fact that [Ebbinghaus's] point of view is closer to that of 'psycho-physical materialism' than mine, and that this also gave his polemic against you its special coloring."¹⁴³

This evaluation is reinforced by the fact that Ebbinghaus had thought that this great leap forward in the history of psychology that made Dilthey's criticism so mistaken consisted in the shift of explanatory psychology from an explanatory model based on physics and chemistry to the more appropriate natural-scientific paradigm of biology.¹⁴⁴ Clearly then, Ebbinghaus still maintained that psychology should be considered a *Naturwissenschaft*, even if it required a different kind of natural-scientific field more suited to its subject matter.

The second aspect of Ebbinghaus's critique, and the one that would prove to be philosophically so damning, was his contention that Dilthey's own 'descriptions' of the psychic process were actually far more hypothetical than he was admitting. Ebbinghaus would bring to full articulation the exact tensions we have already seen Dilthey struggling with previously:

Dilthey does not distinguish sharply enough between the partial contents taken from reality and the connection gained through hypothetical transfers (the means of explanation and the object of explanation) ... We hear how emphatically he discusses the difficulties of clarifying the dark purposeful nexus of mental life. In making the addition, he unambiguously and rightly emphasizes that all related concepts and processes are taken from living inner experience. But then he suddenly jumps, as if it were a legitimate result of what he has just emphasized, to the assertion that the connection he has discovered is also living experience and not just speculation, and by later confirming this assertion, he is convinced that the results of his additions seem to have something within, completely different than what others have in theirs.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Letter from Wilhelm Wundt to Wilhelm Dilthey, dated the 8th of November, 1895. See Wilhelm Dilthey, *Briefwechsel, Band II: 1882-1895*, ed. Gudrun Kühne-Bertram and Hans-Ulrich Lessing (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015) p. 571-572.

¹⁴⁴ Hermann Ebbinghaus, "Über erklärende und beschreibende Psychologie", *Zeitschrift für Psychologie und Physiologie der Sinnesorgane* 9 (1896), p. 175.

¹⁴⁵ Hermann Ebbinghaus, "Über erklärende und beschreibende Psychologie", *Zeitschrift für Psychologie und Physiologie der Sinnesorgane* 9 (1896), p. 192.

The fact was that the ‘objective psychic nexus’ as Dilthey had been attempting to set it up was simply not always given in immediate experience; it was a hypothesis that he built up from disparate moments or aspects of consciousness. Dilthey had tried to go beyond Kant’s synthetic unity of apperception, but in doing so, he had run over the edge of the cliff; he had gone too far and lost that firm grounding beneath his feet. Dilthey’s narrativistic ‘objective psychic nexus,’ which was supposedly always given in experience and lived through in *Erlebnis*, was not, in the end, any more self-evident than the ‘arbitrary’ units postulated by the explanatory psychologists. The distinction between *Wissen* and *Erkennen* could not stand as Dilthey had formulated it while still allowing the connections and uniformities between psychic states to be brought to bright consciousness as they changed. Dilthey’s sense of narrative was not apodictically evident but was simply an ‘intuition,’ one that was particularly congenial to how the person who experiences temporality as an essential aspect of their existence – that is, the modern, ‘historical’ individual – would understand the world. But it was not experienced in the same *necessary* way that Kant’s unity was experienced. It was simply another meaningful-laden way of experiencing the world.

In a letter written immediately after he had read Ebbinghaus’s critique, Dilthey’s lifelong friend, the Count Paul Yorck von Wartenburg, wrote to Dilthey and criticized Ebbinghaus for confusing the ‘object of explanation’ (*Erklärungsgegenstand*) and the ‘means of explanation’ (*Mittelgegenstand*): “[If Ebbinghaus believes] The object of explanation, not the means, refers to the living nexus, then he has not grasped the meaning of your statement at all. It is precisely the nexus that is the means of explanation.”¹⁴⁶ In the letter, Yorck gently chides Dilthey for allowing this conceptual confusion to occur; he had previously warned Dilthey about the possibility for

¹⁴⁶ Letter from Paul Yorck von Wartenburg to Wilhelm Dilthey, dated the 3rd of November, 1895. See Wilhelm Dilthey, *Briefwechsel, Band II: 1882-1895*, ed. Gudrun Kühne-Bertram and Hans-Ulrich Lessing (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015) p. 563-567.

this confusion, and Dilthey had, for whatever reason, allowed the ambiguity to remain in his writing. However, Yorck is somewhat missing the problem here; Dilthey is, in fact, trying to have it *both* ways. It is true that Dilthey wants to use the psychic nexus to explain the creation of values, appearance of meaning, flow of mental states, validity of logic, etc. However, Dilthey also needs *Erlebnis* to be explainable by the interactions between the will, consciousness, and acquired psychic nexus, so that it can be analyzable and then critiqued in a scientific way; hence, why Dilthey always referred to ‘uniformities’ or ‘productive influences’ between mental states in time, though they are perhaps not as strict as ‘laws’ in the natural scientific sense. This is the entire point of a Critique of Historical Reason; to put one’s perceived meaning of life or history on trial, and, more importantly, to discover *how* value or meaning judgements are developed.¹⁴⁷

This fact – that there was no ‘pure description’ of inner experience, that inner perception was always an interpretation that always required hypothetical postulations – represented an enormous problem for Dilthey, and it was one that he would never solve. The immediate aftermath of the publication of Ebbinghaus’s letter was dramatic; according to Michael Ermarth,

[Dilthey] had previously delighted in frequent ‘philosophical walks’ with Ebbinghaus and considered him the pre-eminent psychologist at Berlin. After the article appeared, Dilthey declined to attend an international psychological congress to which he had been personally invited by Theodor Lipps and William James because he could not bear to sit in the same room with Ebbinghaus.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ It is also well-studied how, in the decade before the publication of *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger expressly discussed how he believed that Yorck’s position relative to Dilthey had to be expanded upon. Heidegger can say this because his philosophical approach gives up on the search for a foundational *Grundwissenschaft* of a Critique capable of ‘overcoming’ historical relativism. See Theodore Kisiel, *The Genesis of Heidegger’s Being and Time* (CA: University of California Press, 1993) p. 321-326.

¹⁴⁸ Michael Ermarth, *Wilhelm Dilthey: The Critique of Historical Reason* (IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978) p. 184.

In addition, although Dilthey had already given some of his psychology lectures to Carl Stumpf once Stumpf had arrived in Berlin the year prior, he now completely stopped lecturing on the topic.¹⁴⁹

The problem of psychological introspection, and Dilthey's consequent abandonment of psychology, would prove the primary catalyst for the shift in Dilthey's project for grounding the human sciences. In a lecture delivered a few years later, he criticized the *Lebensphilosophen* precisely for their wildly introspective tendencies, referring explicitly to Nietzsche, Wagner, and Schopenhauer.¹⁵⁰ It is clear from Dilthey's post-*Ideen* notes that he returned to William James's *Principles of Psychology*, and was especially taken with those sections which criticized introspection. Dilthey would write that "the antinomy in psychology has been pointed out by James: that one can never grasp a feeling as such in self-observation. Such a feeling is always something very complex and compacted, which can be partially reduced to its parts but not taken whole. However, one can overcome the standpoint of James through the relation of expression and understanding."¹⁵¹

This is how Dilthey came to his late attempt to ground the human sciences in hermeneutics. Dilthey took Ebbinghaus's and James's critiques of introspection to heart and concluded that the only common ground among the *Geisteswissenschaften* was their shared method of the interpretation of externalized expressions of human life *ex post facto*: "The antimony of psychology can be solved only in the hermeneutic understanding of expression."¹⁵² It is clear that Dilthey's attempted Critique had failed; the judgement of meaning before the act

¹⁴⁹ *GS*, vol. 21.

¹⁵⁰ *GS*, vol. 20, p. 236.

¹⁵¹ *GS*, vol. 7, p. 319.

¹⁵² *GS*, vol. 7, p. 319.

by virtue of the self-observation of the development of one's own value judgements was impossible.

As he put it in 1905, "But in what does the particular nature of this connection between whole and part within life consist? – It is a connection that is never completely made. One would have to wait until the end of one's life and then in the hour of death look back at the whole in which the connection of its parts could be seen. One would have to wait for the end of history in order to possess complete material for the determination of its meaning. On the other hand, the whole exists for us only insofar as it is intelligible through its parts. Understanding always moves between these two ways of looking at things... What we posit as our goal for the future conditions our determination of the meaning of the past."¹⁵³ The clear comparison here is Freud, and that comparison has indeed been made by other commentators. Jürgen Habermas made the connection with both Freud and Hegel's 'Owl of Minerva,' writing, in a fashion remarkably reminiscent of Dilthey, that,

Ultimately, the subject too must be able to narrate his own history... In a formative process we only learn as much about the world as we simultaneously experience in ourselves as the learning subject. This dialectic of knowledge of the world and knowledge of oneself is the *experience of reflection* whose course Hegel sketched in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In like manner, Freud represented the individual life history as one pathway of the experience of reflection.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ *GS*, vol. 7, p. 233.

¹⁵⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson and Jerry Stark (MA: The MIT Press, 1988) p. 183. Max Horkheimer, too, noticed this aspect of Dilthey's thought, and went further in connecting it with Dilthey's bourgeois individualism: "The agreement [between Freud and Dilthey], however, is rooted even deeper. It lies above all in the conception of a coherent totality of meaning (*Sinnzusammenhang*) in each individual existence, a totality which develops itself in the struggle between the individual being and his environment... In any case, these theories might be regarded as the fulfilment of Dilthey's demand that the individual life, in its typical structures, be presented as a coherent totality of meaning." Max Horkheimer, "The Relation between Psychology and Sociology in the Work of Wilhelm Dilthey," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 8, no. 3 (1939): p. 441.

Dilthey's work reveals a fundamental question concerning one's relationship to history. Though one can never apprehend psychic states immediately, the individual's own life and experiences are still key for reconstructing knowledge of the past. As Habermas notes above, knowledge of the self and knowledge of the world are intimately tied up with one another. Dilthey cannot give up entirely the crucial aspect of self-knowledge in knowledge of the world, because it is from this source that certain indispensable beginnings are made. It turns out, then, that ironically Dilthey's critical mistake was not in his recourse to introspection but on a fundamentally confused reliance on a certain 19th century view of what 'science' and 'objectivity' was when it came to understanding history. Dilthey's thought presses right up against the boundaries of the theretofore existing historical sciences, and, unbeknownst to him, bursts them open for later generations. Martin Heidegger and his student, Hans-Georg Gadamer, for example, would criticize Dilthey precisely for his "succumbing... completely to the modern concept of science..."¹⁵⁵ They attempted, in recognition of this weakness in Dilthey's general approach, to further Dilthey's later project in hermeneutics and *Verstehen*. Habermas, for his part, would attempt to reformulate the standing of the human sciences by refashioning them as "reconstructive" sciences.

The aspect of self-knowledge involved in these movements beyond Dilthey's project is important because it is not clear how one could even think about or understand the past at all if it were not recognized by the subject as a variation on some theme or axis that he is already familiar with. After all, one's emotions, beliefs, and concepts – his subjective states – are produced by, and subsequently act on, the content of history as well, though they may be lesser

¹⁵⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. David E. Linge (CA: University of California Press, 1976) p. 48.

or greater in consequence than an ‘event.’ This is the strikingly simple intuition behind Dilthey’s belief in one’s ‘immediate’ access to history: one lives in history, and history lives through him. Thus, though the failure of Dilthey’s psychological project caused him to abandon introspection as a suitable form of knowledge for *Verstehen*, the lesson for us today is *not* that the self is an invalid site of knowledge, but that the 19th century vision of ‘valid knowledge,’ against which Dilthey fought so hard but nevertheless remained bounded by, was fundamentally mistaken. This indeed was the conclusion reached by Heidegger.

But the 20th century has seen many debates over the status of history and the methods by which to understand history, and very few of them take up this question of immediacy. The fact that the subject does not contain history in its totality purely within his own mind may seem strikingly obvious to those who have come after, and benefited from, the injunctions of such different philosophers of history as Arthur Danto and Hayden White; but the fact is that at the end of the 19th century, that century which saw the very birth of any genuine historical consciousness, it was clearly *not* obvious. These were advancements which had to be made, and Dilthey’s work at the end of the eighteenth century were crucial in producing them.

Conclusion:

Further evidence for the appropriateness of construing Dilthey’s significance in the way presented in the present study can be seen by briefly noting how his work has been taken up by some of the inheritors of the German, ‘post-Idealist’ tradition. Because of their relation to Marx’s thought, the Frankfurt School and its epigone have carried on the philosophical problem of the

proper understanding and presentation of history.¹⁵⁶ Max Horkheimer criticized Dilthey for just this mistaken insistence on ‘immediacy’:

[Dilthey] persists in [scientific psychology’s] unfounded belief that valid insight must confine itself to the realm of the immediately given – the ‘*données immédiates de la conscience*’ which also play so vast a role in Bergson’s vitalism... His idea of a ‘*Sinnzusammenhang*’ is an attempt to determine, with insufficient means, the concrete being of a man by a positivistic restriction to the ‘given,’ to the ‘data’ of his so-called inner life, whereas this concrete unity can be understood only by transcending those limits and conceiving man as a real element of a real world.¹⁵⁷

Alfred Schmidt, one of the first inheritors of the Frankfurt School’s philosophical program and Horkheimer’s student, in his own work recognized the static nature of Dilthey’s method of interpreting history based on an ahistorical ‘human nature’:

Dilthey, convinced that ‘the uniform is the foundation of individuation,’ views the great cultural periods as transient forms of expression of something unchanging. That is, over centuries the homogenous essence of individuals fans out toward its different aspects... The dubious nature of conceiving human essence in this manner is clear. Dilthey’s metaphysics raises to the level of (differentiating) aspects of the objectifications – of psychologically interpreted – ‘life,’ what are in fact utterly distinct, natural, social-economic, and generally historical circumstances... It is difficult to understand how the cultural phenomena, not to mention the unity, of an epoch rest on a structure of the soul which in each case manifests one aspect of the whole nature of human beings.¹⁵⁸

I take what Schmidt to be noticing here is precisely what I have attempted to argue for in this paper, which – as far as I am aware – no other sustained study of Dilthey has argued: that is, that Dilthey proposes a kind of static, phenomenologically uncovered necessary form of ‘life’ – what Schmidt here refers to as a ‘human essence,’ or ‘structure of the soul’ – by which Dilthey attempts to immediately understand man in history. What Schmidt does not bring forward here

¹⁵⁶ Alfred Schmidt, *Kritische Theorie als Geschichtsphilosophie* (München: Carl Hanser, 1976) p. 7-8.

¹⁵⁷ Max Horkheimer, “The Relation between Psychology and Sociology in the Work of Wilhelm Dilthey,” *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 8, no. 3 (1939): p. 437.

¹⁵⁸ Alfred Schmidt, *History and Structure*, trans. Jeffrey Herf (MA: Cambridge University Press, 1981) p. 15.

explicitly, on account of his broader philosophical concerns, is what this ‘essence’ *is*. The philosophical readings contained in the present study were intended to throw light on Dilthey’s highly complex vision of what this essence is – on Dilthey’s vision of the nature of human life.

These ‘broader concerns’ of Schmidt’s were his various attempts to articulate and clarify a central philosophical problem which Dilthey’s work also makes contact with. On this particular occasion, Schmidt was attempting to formulate a response from the dialectical tradition to the new, ‘structuralist’ Marxism being developed by Louis Althusser and his students in France. In these debates over the proper way of reading Marx’s texts, a central concern for Schmidt is the influence – or, for Althusser and his school, the lack thereof – of Hegel on Marx’s *Capital*. In this debate, the distinction for Marx between the *Forschungsweise*, or “method of inquiry,” and the *Darstellungweise*, or “method of presentation,” rises to the level of the highest significance. Marx’s work is exemplary for our purposes here because he is a thinker who both has something like a ‘theory of history’ and is conscious of how the form of a work presents a vision of the world.

This aspect of Marx’s thought also applies for the attempt to work out any historical method at all – what Droysen once referred to as a *Historik* – and is necessary precisely because of the fact that the logical and the historical are united only in a *mediated* fashion; we do not have the river of history simply within our minds, waiting to be accessed, as Dilthey dreamed. Instead, as Hegel stressed, “The essential requirement for the science of logic is not... that the beginning be a pure immediacy, but rather that the whole of the science be within itself a circle in which the first is also the last and the last is also the first.”¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), p. 71.

What is fundamentally revealed by Dilthey's attempt to use the narrative form to assimilate the study of history and life, and therefore to simply eliminate the problem of mediation, is the very presence of the philosophical problem concerning how to represent or think about history. That is, Dilthey would not have to construct the form of history based on an analogy with the modern feeling of life if the proper way to represent history were simply obvious or given. Dilthey simultaneously held dual commitments to an extreme foundationalism – a requirement of his attempt to establish a *Grundwissenschaft* for the human sciences – and an equally extreme anti-foundationalism, stemming from his sensitivity to historical consciousness. Because of this, Dilthey had to place the narrative form that he wished to discover in the reality of historical events as the very form of thought itself; the most fundamental precondition for our thinking about anything at all. Otherwise, he could not simultaneously claim that what he had discovered – the essence of human life – was the 'most fundamental' ground of thought, as well as claim that history gave immediate expression to life and was therefore immediately accessible.

But if the connection between the narrative form of life and the narrative form of history is *not* necessary in this way, and history is instead only represented in this way by modern subjects based on an undefended analogy with how we typically understand our own lives, then the only basis for representing history in a narrative form is because we believe that the interactions that happen on the level that we find necessary in representing socio-historical reality have the same character as the interactions that we find necessary in representing our individual lives. This may, in the end, indeed be the case; but the argument remains to be made. Dilthey's contribution is to show that even in history, we must be careful not to revert to a kind of pre-Kantian crude empiricism; history is not simply 'there' for us to investigate. What is necessary to recognize in the practice of constructing a historical representation or narrative is

the simple fact that it *must be constructed* by the thinker who is investigating it. Most important for present purposes in discussing Marx's historiographical methodology here is not primarily the political or philosophical importance of his disagreement with a historical idealist like Max Weber, however, but indeed the very fact of having to formulate a historical methodology at all.

Just over a half century ago, Hayden White detected and brought to light this philosophical problem by a deep figural analysis of the writings of some of the great modern narrative historians and philosophers of history of the 19th century. White argued that "the historian performs an essentially *poetic* act, in which he *prefigures* the historical field and constitutes it as a domain upon which to bring to bear the specific theories he will use to explain 'what was *really* happening' in it."¹⁶⁰ When one read histories, one is not simply presented with the bare empirical existence of events; they always come in a narrative that determines their meaning. One does not simply glean what really happened, nor even is one able to compare their 'pure' or 'real' existence with the 'illusory' mode of narrating them, so that one might be able to 'see through' the form of emplotment. As Frank Ankersmit has succinctly put it, White showed us that "we do not look *through* texts but *at* them," so that "we must recognize that the historical text is a most complex instrument meant to generate historical meaning" and no simple record of events.¹⁶¹

However, what distinguishes the deadly cyclical movement of White's *combinatoire* – as well as Hegel's Idealism and Schleiermacher's hermeneutic circle – from genuine historical thinking is again the distance between the movement of thought and the process of history. They are, again, non-identical; for the raw material of history must have a different ontological status

¹⁶⁰ Hayden White, *Metahistory* (MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) p. x.

¹⁶¹ Frank Ankersmit, *Truth, Reference and Meaning in Historical Representation* (NY: Cornell University Press, 2012) p. 197.

than the raw material of a fictive narrative. The problem of ‘having’ to choose some transcendental framework or mode of emplotment, while doubtlessly applying to the ways one can *understand* or *represent* history, does not necessarily apply to the way history as the movement of the social world actually *is*. As Fredric Jameson has said in criticism of White,

What is missing is that mechanism of historical selection – that infrastructural limiting situation – to which it falls, out of the complete range of purely *logical* possibilities, to reject those which cannot empirically come into being in that determinant historical conjuncture. Thus, to use Greimas’s dramatic example, a variant of a given folktale provides for an *actant* who unites both paternal and sacerdotal functions: this particular variant, therefore – while it remains a logical possibility – cannot be empirically realized in Roman Catholic Lithuania owing to the celibacy of priests...¹⁶²

History does not happen only in the mind. What seems to be missing from White’s account is that the subject *is*, in a *mediated* way, in the middle of history all the time; and though our knowledge of the social and historical world is not immediate in the way Dilthey believed, it is less ungrounded than White makes it appear. Dilthey’s mistaken belief that thought and history have, in fact, the same form, and thus that history is intelligible in the same way that our thoughts are intelligible, is the great sin of Idealism, and likewise of Dilthey; the character of history, as the interactions between existing beings in time, and the character of thought are very different. It may be, as Dilthey claimed, that historical consciousness is the great invention of modernity; but the recognition of that importance produced in himself and other bourgeois philosophers an anxiety so great that nearly all these thinkers had to assert history’s complete intelligibility in the same moment they recognize its importance. They could not, otherwise, stand the consequences which were entailed by their momentous discovery. However, what Dilthey’s thought does bring to the fore is the possibility that the seemingly infinite gulf between

¹⁶² Fredric Jameson, “Figural Relativism, or the Poetics of Historiography,” *Diacritics*, 6, no. 1 (Spring, 1976): p. 6.

“the real substance of the continuous movement of mankind” and the subject’s ability to capture that substance in thought may not be so infinite as it has seemed.

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