

## *Introduction: Wilhelm Dilthey in Context*

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### **1 Dilthey's Biography and Philosophy**

Wilhelm Dilthey was born in Biebrich on the Rhine in 1833. He died in the Southern Alps in Seis am Schlern in 1911. Born into an educated Calvinist family, he initially pursued a higher education in theology, history, and philosophy with the intention of following his father's religious vocation as a Reformed minister. Dilthey studied at first at the University of Heidelberg, including under philosopher Kuno Fischer. We see in Dilthey's correspondence from this period his antagonism toward Hegel and Hegelianism as well as his transition from theology to philosophy as he attempts to calm his father's reservations concerning the effects of philosophy: philosophy might begin but does not conclude in problematizing doubt (Dilthey B I: 2).

Dilthey subsequently transferred to the University of Berlin, where he studied with two students of the philosopher, Reformed theologian, and political reformer Friedrich Schleiermacher, Friedrich von Trendelenburg, and August Boeckh. Dilthey remarked in a letter of thanks to his father in 1859 that he owed him a religious sensibility that avoided the extremes of unbelief and enthusiasm (Dilthey B I: 100–103). A certain distance from religion and reverence for religious experience would remain characteristic of his approach to religion.

His early academic training focused on the study of the history of the formation of Christianity, including the history of Christian mysticism and its Jewish and Greek sources, and he learnt from the methods of the German historical school and the prominent German historian Leopold von Ranke. Dilthey's attention to ways and methods of historical perception led him to the hermeneutics (the theory and art of interpretation) of Schleiermacher who was a pivotal touchstone for his early thought. Dilthey completed in 1860 a prize essay for the Schleiermacher Society on "Schleiermacher's Hermeneutical System in Relation to Earlier Protestant

Hermeneutics” (Dilthey B I: 100; GS 14: 595–787 / SW IV: 33–227). This essay was ranked first in the competition and he was commissioned to write a biography of Schleiermacher, volume 1 of which appeared in 1870. Dilthey would emphasize the interconnections between philosophical reflection and personal experience, unfolding the philosophical character of biography and autobiography as well as the role of the individual factual person in interpreting the thought. Schleiermacher’s thought was not only an object of academic concern for Dilthey, as Dilthey identified with the liberal reformist tradition associated with Wilhelm von Humboldt and Schleiermacher. He became involved in liberal politics and the circle of Theodor Mommsen and debated with future liberal politicians such as Wilhelm Wehrenpfennig (Dilthey B I: 103–127). The Hessian Dilthey often did not find the Prussian liberals sufficiently liberal (Dilthey B I: 104).

Dilthey defended his dissertation on Schleiermacher’s ethics and habilitation thesis on moral consciousness in 1864, becoming an unsalaried *Privatdozent* at the University of Berlin in 1865. Dilthey developed a unique approach to the question of historical consciousness that overcame the one-sidedness of both the historical school, absorbed in particularities, and the abstract ahistorical rationality typical of traditional philosophy. He also articulated the scope and experiential basis of the historical and systematic human sciences.

Dilthey had a long career teaching philosophy, and what would now be classified as disciplines such as psychology and social theory, at the Universities of Basel (1867), Kiel (1868–1871), Breslau (Wrocław) (1871–1883), where he became close friends with the local aristocratic intellectual Paul Yorck von Wartenburg, and finally Berlin (1883–1908) as the successor of Rudolf Hermann Lotze.

Academic philosophy still encompassed in the nineteenth-century areas that would become independent historical and social sciences. Dilthey worked as (what would now be described as) a philosopher, intellectual historian, and human scientist (including the study of psychology and society), prolifically publishing academic articles and treatises as well as popular works such as *Lived Experience and Poetry*, which was first published in 1906 and went through ten editions by 1929.

Dilthey became a significant, and not uncontroversial, intellectual and cultural figure in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century German intellectual history. This influence was extended through the work of his students, who began publishing the *Collected Writings* (*Gesammelte Schriften*), a critical edition of his works, at the outset of World War I. It was only recently completed with the publication of volume 26 in

2005 and volume 25 in 2006. The topics of his writings gathered in these twenty-six volumes range across the human and natural sciences, including detailed philosophical, literary, and political histories as well as theoretical works addressing their systematic character and foundations. They address the methodology of scientific research, the differences between the human (*Geisteswissenschaften*) and natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*), aesthetics, epistemology, psychology, modern Western intellectual and cultural history, and biography.

Through circles of students such as Leo Baeck, Martin Buber, Bernhard Groethuysen, Georg Misch, Herman Nohl, visitors from abroad such as W. E. B. Du Bois who attended his lectures in 1883, and readers – to name only a few – such as Helmuth Plessner, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Herbert Marcuse, Karl-Otto Apel, and Jürgen Habermas, Dilthey's works continued to explicitly and implicitly inform and be contested in the study of philosophy, history, and the human sciences in movements such as Neo-Kantianism, phenomenology, philosophical hermeneutics, and critical theory.

A more neglected dimension of Dilthey's endeavors is his liberal social-political engagement, including his support for the education of women. He was an advocate of female higher education and supported the campaign, organized by Helene Lange, for the right of women to earn university degrees. He encouraged and tutored female students and researchers, most notably the political reformers and women's rights advocates Gertrud Bäumer and Helene Stöcker (who was Dilthey's research assistant from 1896 to 1899).<sup>1</sup>

Dilthey is characteristically interpreted in contemporary philosophy as an inheritor of Johann Gottfried Herder's expressivist approach to language and as part of the modern hermeneutical "lineage" that extends from Friedrich Ast and Schleiermacher through Dilthey to Heidegger, Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur.<sup>2</sup> But, like Schleiermacher before him, Dilthey was not only concerned with issues of expression, interpretation, and language and does not limit human scientific inquiry to the model of hermeneutics as textual or linguistic analysis. Such categories, which make his thought appear as a precursor that has been overcome in the further

<sup>1</sup> Dilthey and the development of the German women's movement is a little explored topic. Helene Stöcker and Gertrud Bäumer note Dilthey's significance in Schaser (2000, 106) and Stöcker (2015, 54–55, 66).

<sup>2</sup> On the expressivist and historicist character of Dilthey's thought, see Beiser (2011, 100); Forster (2010, 37). On Gadamer's narrative sidelining Dilthey's hermeneutics, compare the discussion in Nenon (1995).

hermeneutical turns of Heidegger and Gadamer, need to be situated in the larger context of his thought for it to be appropriately addressed in its own significance and situation.

Dilthey's interests in language and hermeneutics were part of a more extensive project to transform the foundations (epistemology) and practice (science) of knowing by describing and analyzing its experiential character in relation to the natural and social conditions of human existence.<sup>3</sup> Dilthey's project of a "critique of historical reason," which appears to be both quasi-transcendental philosophy and quasi-philosophical anthropology, aimed at articulating an alternative critical philosophy that would concretely situate rationality and knowing, disclosing how they operate within the immanence of human life and experience. This critique of historical reason should be understood as a critique of experiential reason; philosophy transitions from its traditional role as metaphysics to an "experiential science" of spirit (*Geist*) – that is, socially historically mediated human life – that formulates "the laws governing social, intellectual and moral phenomena" (Dilthey GS 5: 27).

## 2 Dilthey in Historical Context

As with other nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century thinkers, Dilthey had divergent research agendas, methodological strategies, and cultural-historical contexts from subsequent generations that have adopted and contested his interpretive strategies. It would be historically anachronistic and philosophically problematic to describe and assess Dilthey's works according to the interests and standards of later philosophical perspectives. Heidegger and Gadamer applied an ontological understanding of hermeneutics upon a thinker who was deeply engaged with the empirical and ontic scientific inquiries of his time. Dilthey did not overcome and deny experiences of mind and consciousness for the sake of a discursive analysis of being. He linked the philosophical investigation of mental phenomena to their immanent worldly conditions and the findings of the contemporary sciences. Dilthey's pursuits can be at important points opaque to readers because of his detailed and extensive engagement with the scientific research and cultural discourses of his time. Many of the scientists, philosophers, and artists with whom he interacted across the span of his life are forgotten or left in footnotes in

<sup>3</sup> On Dilthey's "expansive naturalism," which breaks through its reductive interpretations, see Nelson (2013a) as well as Jos de Mul's contribution to this volume.

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canonical accounts of the history of nineteenth-century philosophy that focus on a few isolated figures instead of considering its more comprehensive cultural and intellectual contexts.

To read Dilthey's writings in the present interpretive moment is to arrive at a configuration of thought that calls for being understood on its own terms, as an interpretive task, even as these texts are inevitably interpreted from our own hermeneutical situation in response to present needs and questions. Such reading across epochs and cultures can reach an unfamiliar place if it risks an actual encounter, a moment where the present has not yet been despite its being elusively "familiar" through its subsequent interpretive reception.

The appreciation of "distance" (*Abstand*), the temporal pause that is the condition for the emancipatory effect of "historical consciousness" in relation to the present, is a guiding thread in Dilthey's interpretation of history and his lifelong and unfinished project of a critique of historical reason. The distance and discontinuity that historical consciousness introduces in relation to the present is the possibility of engaging, confronting, and critiquing the present, and the prevailing traditions, prejudices, and customs that shape social and individual life.

Dilthey's debt to and appreciation of the "historical school," i.e., the historians of nineteenth-century Germany whose stated task was to pursue the self-understanding of individuals and peoples for their own sake instead of for the purposes of the present, does not aim at either the relativistic or communitarian affirmation of the fixed essence or constant identity of a people (*Volk*), or the adulation of the collective spirit of one people over and against others. Dilthey resisted the increasingly excessive nationalist and biologicistic organicism of his era and its ideological uses.<sup>4</sup> Although he was committed to meaning-holism and allowed for impersonal structures and social institutions in the human sciences, he rejected the notion of the collective soul or spirit of a people due to his commitments to the priority of the individual and his proximity to methodological individualism.<sup>5</sup>

Buber, who helped the Dilthey family with the funeral arrangements after Dilthey's death in Seis am Schlern in 1911, pointed out in a discussion of Hebrew humanism how it was "my teacher" Dilthey who showed the necessity of affirming the human individual and community for there

<sup>4</sup> On this complex issue, see Bulhof (1980, 14); Corngold (1994, 301–337); Krell (1992, 339); Makkreel (1992, 65).

<sup>5</sup> Dilthey rejected the notion of a collective subject, see GS 1: 42; GS 22: 3; GS 24: 52.

to be genuine individual and national renewal.<sup>6</sup> As Ilse Nina Bulhof noted, Dilthey was not a political radical of the left, right, or center; he was a late nineteenth-century bourgeois German liberal intellectual committed to both progressive Enlightenment ideas and to being a loyal servant to the Prussian crown and citizen of the German empire.<sup>7</sup> In the vein of the left wing of the National Liberal Party with which he associated, Dilthey's politics existed in the tension between the unredeemed demands of 1848 for democracy and individual freedom and the impetus toward national unity, sovereignty, and realistic politics promoted by the Bismarckian state (Herrmann, in Dilthey GS 16: xiii).

Due to Dilthey's commitments to a multifaceted civil society – that encompassed the free self-formation and cultivation of individuality, the intimacy of family life, the solidarity of free associations, and a cosmopolitan historical and cultural pluralism – Dilthey was critical of radical forms of statism and ethnically based collectivism, as well as existing society's socialist and Marxist critics.<sup>8</sup> Dilthey critiqued Marx's thought as abstracting from and doing violence to the real needs and interests of individuals, leveling the differentiated systems and spheres of social-political life, at the same time as he appreciated Marx's analysis of the real problems of the concentration of capital in the economy and of power by the state.<sup>9</sup>

There have been multiple ways of looking at this more or less centrist political position. Dilthey has been interpreted as a Goethean liberal and humanist. Dilthey has been identified – beginning with his friend and correspondent Paul Yorck von Wartenburg – in Gadamer's words as a “cultural liberal.”<sup>10</sup> Dilthey represents from this perspective a liberal cosmopolitan relativism and the historicity that threatens to disintegrate the integrity of a life-form into a chaotic multiplicity of perspectives and possible truths. According to Yorck, in a pietistic criticism of his friend

<sup>6</sup> Buber (1997, 240); Rickman (1979, 41). Buber notes Dilthey's philosophical importance for him and the new philosophical anthropology a number of times. But, he would also claim that while Dilthey and Simmel were his most important teachers, they were not important for the development of his dialogical philosophy of “I and thou.” Compare Buber (2001, 32).

<sup>7</sup> Note Ulrich Herrmann's discussion of Dilthey's commitment to “national liberalism” in his introduction to GS 16: xiii.

<sup>8</sup> Bulhof (1980, 12–16). This liberal individualist aspect of Dilthey's argumentation, missed in readings that one-sidedly reduce his thought to holism or even to pantheism, is the one that the Austrian economic school used in their critique of Neurath's socialism in the 1920s, which failed to recognize Dilthey's rejection of egocentric individualism for a more social-historically nuanced and contextual individualism (see Nelson 2018a).

<sup>9</sup> On Dilthey's criticism of Marx's abstractness, see GS 17: 186–187.

<sup>10</sup> Gadamer (1995, 9). Christofer Zöckler argues that Gadamer neglects and opposes the dynamic elements and radical potential of Dilthey's thought in Zöckler (1975, 120).

adopted by Heidegger, Leo Strauss, and Gadamer, Dilthey appreciated faith as a cultural expression of life and could richly describe and analyze it in his historical writings. Christianity became a historical formation and cultural achievement mediating and infringing upon the lived experience of interiority.

The early Heidegger claim that Yorck's spirit must be made to serve Dilthey's work, a claim in which the servant is the master, as Gadamer noted, should be interpreted in this context (Gadamer 1995, 9). The son and grandson of Calvinist ministers, Dilthey abandoned Calvinistic devotion and offered a secular cultural justification for the role of the religious in human life. Dilthey did not advocate the priority of the Christian faith and the German nation in the emotional ways that the pietistic aristocrat Yorck demanded: as a living, fundamental, disclosive truth that superseded all other possible truths. Dilthey's principled contextualism is taken by his critics to be a relativistic abandonment of tradition that entails an arbitrary, anarchic, and nihilistic "anything goes" undermining faith and wisdom in a flood of incommensurable perspectives and worldviews.<sup>11</sup>

### 3 The Hermeneutics of Historical Life

Dilthey has also been identified – by Isaiah Berlin – with an expressivist conservatism in the lineage of Giambattista Vico, Edmund Burke, and Herder that emphasizes preserving the integrity of collective and individual forms of life against their leveling integration into a totality or under an indifferent universal principle. This reading stresses the internal coherence and solidity of a life-nexus (*Lebenszusammenhang*) that persistently and adaptively reproduces itself through customs, habits, social structures, and traditions in response to changing conditions and circumstances. The adaptive development of individuals in their typically and relatively stable life contexts does not entail "anything goes" on the basis of feeling and imagination; its contextually rules it out. The problem with reading Dilthey as a radical relativist is that everything is permissible only in the imagination of artists, mystics, and the insane; that is, in the realm of inspiration and genius in contrast to the regularities of everyday life.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> On Dilthey's conception of worldviews, its conflictual character, and relation to his account of historical formation, see Nelson (2011b; 2015b). Heidegger's preference for Yorck will lead his philosophy in a different direction than Dilthey's, and is associated with his political sensibility (compare Nelson 2016b). On Heidegger's reception of Dilthey, see also Nelson (2013b; 2015a; 2016a).

<sup>12</sup> On the priority of the imagination, as the sense of the whole in Dilthey, see my analysis in Nelson (2018b).

Humans are shaped in interpretive interaction with their biological, environmental, psychological, social-historical, and intellectual-rational conditions in typical ways that indicate generalizable and – in conjunction with the study of human nature – universal characteristics.<sup>13</sup> The difficulty with interpreting Dilthey as a conservative communitarian is that society does not consist of one essential identity or traditional way of life that retains its form through historical transformations. There is no primary origin or teleological goal to secure the course of historical change. Social life is a changing if often stable crossing, tension, and conflict between a multiplicity of forces, interpretations, and worldviews that from Dilthey's perspective cannot be resolved but at most can only be temporarily balanced. Despite Dilthey's affinities with Vico, David Hume, and Burke, this reading underestimates the extent to which Dilthey was committed to a historically oriented and contextualizing rethinking and modest conception of the Enlightenment, critical reason, and science. As Max Horkheimer noted, Dilthey "felt himself to be a disciple of the Enlightenment" (Horkheimer 1939, 430).

The differences in interpretation can be traced to Dilthey's attempts to rehabilitate earlier German liberal cultural ideals (particularly those associated with Kant, Goethe, and Schiller) under the altered conditions of advancing modernization and the politics of the new German state. Dilthey attempted to reformulate the ideals of free individuality and the formation and cultivation (*Bildung*) of the person articulated by the poets and philosophers of the past under the altered disenchanted conditions of an empirical and positivist regime of knowledge. Dilthey's project responds to as much as it reflects a crisis of historical identity and historical understanding (compare Bambach 1995, 11).

Historicism has been interpreted as the rejection of the emancipatory universalism of the Enlightenment based on the conservatism, nationalism, and statism of the right Hegelian philosophers and the anti-Hegelian Prussian historians. Dilthey inherited both the rich descriptive method and the philosophical critique of the anti-conceptualism of the historical school associated with the historians Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), Johann Gustav Droysen (1808–1884), and Friedrich Meinecke (1862–1954). The philosophical lessons of historicism, adopting the pluralistic conception of history articulated by Humboldt and Herder and the source-based

<sup>13</sup> The roles of understanding and interpretation differentiate Dilthey's account from forms of structural-functional and systems-theoretical social explanations. See my discussion of his interpretive psychology, as an example of an interpretive human science, in Nelson (2014).



methodology of Ranke, are for Dilthey the actual (“positive” in the nineteenth-century sense of the word) and irrevocable plurality and value of individuals, peoples, and worldviews.<sup>14</sup> Despite the conservatism of the historical school, Dilthey maintained that the historical turn deepened rather than overturned the emancipatory tendencies of modernity: “The historical worldview liberates the human spirit from the last chains that natural science and philosophy have not yet broken” (GS 5: 9; compare Makkreel 1992, 3). The historical sensibility for the unique and singular is not a rejection but a continuation and culmination of the modernist Enlightenment project of human emancipation and its concern for individual autonomy.

History, which is a narrative of immeasurable terror and suffering, is not identical with a historical sensibility absorbed in present conditions; history can be more than an ideological and pedagogical justification of the present, its suffering, and the existing state of affairs. The critical and emancipatory moment of historical understanding was recognized by the early Heidegger where it frees the past in the present for the sake of the future: “Historical consciousness liberates the past for the future, and it is then that the past gains force and becomes productive” (Heidegger 2002, 175).

The critical and potentially emancipatory moment, “destructuring” as Heidegger would later redescribe it, of historical distance in relation to the present has been a key element in Dilthey’s legacy recognized by diverse philosophers: Heidegger’s lecture courses and occasional writings of the 1920s concerning the hermeneutics of factual life; José Ortega y Gasset’s dialectic of historical reason and Karl Jaspers’s philosophy and psychology of worldviews; Georg Misch and Helmuth Plessner’s extension and transformation of Dilthey’s project into philosophical anthropology in Göttingen in the 1920s; Martin Buber and Leo Baeck’s adaptation of their Berlin teacher’s historical-anthropological and comparative interpretive strategies; and the explorations of the early Herbert Marcuse and Habermas concerning possibilities of a hermeneutical materialism and critical social theory in their respective early writings: *Hegel’s Ontology and the Theory of Historicity* (1932) and *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968).

#### 4 Dilthey’s Conception of the Sciences

The appreciation of Dilthey’s thought has not always been universal. Dilthey’s emphasis of the interruptive and relativizing power of historical

<sup>14</sup> On Dilthey’s pluralism and its intercultural significance, as developed in the work of his student and son-in-law Georg Misch, see Nelson (2017, 131–157).

distance was also criticized for its relativistic implications by Edmund Husserl in his *Logos* article “Philosophy as a Rigorous Science.” Dilthey’s thought has been judged as a source of modernistic nihilism by Leo Strauss, identified as a predecessor of fascism and life-philosophical irrationalism by Walter Benjamin and Georg Lukács, accused of supporting the myth of the atomistic individual by Georg Simmel, and condemned for his continuation of modern epistemology by Heidegger and his Enlightenment-oriented “prejudice against prejudices” and positivistic destruction of the continuousness of tradition and its disclosive truth by Gadamer in *Truth and Method*.<sup>15</sup>

Historical consciousness is intrinsically “modernistic” due to its disturbing of continuity and identity by introducing intervals, distances, and differences that, it implies, reflection and conceptualization should respect rather than strive to overcome. Instead of establishing the neutral indifference feared by anti-modernists, however, historical thinking in Dilthey’s case relativizes and pluralizes for the sake of concrete individuals and the recognition of their own ethical life. Historical reflection allows the concrete individual person, who remains invisible to misappropriated natural scientific categories and speculative metaphysical thinking, to be recognized in her impersonal contexts and conditions and personal relations and dispositions.

The “positive” actually existing factual individual emerges immanently as a singular ethical personality from a unique configuration of intersecting natural forces and social-historical processes. This conditional and transient being serves as the point of departure for Dilthey’s philosophy and differentiation of the sciences. Just as the facticity of individual life given in personal lived-experience (*Erlebnis*) is the source and task of the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*), which are shaped by the affects, interests, norms, and values of practical life, the factuality of natural phenomena approached through theoretically formed experience (*Erfahrung*) serves as the basis for the cognitive construction of knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) in the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*).

Owing to the epistemological, interpretive, and practical primacy of lived-experience, which, given its structural, interpretive, and cognitive character should not be reduced to a noncognitive “empathetic insight” (Norris 2000, 26), Dilthey experientially and historically critiqued the rational status of traditional metaphysics and theology while also critiquing the doctrinal and one-dimensional empiricism and positivism

<sup>15</sup> On historicism and Enlightenment, see Gadamer (2004, 531); Masson (2004, 35).