

Anthropology and History in the Early Dilthey

Nabeel Hamid
Concordia University, Montreal
nabeel.hamid@concordia.ca

Abstract

Dilthey frequently recognizes anthropology as a foundational science of human nature and as a cornerstone in the system of the human sciences. While much has been written about Dilthey's "philosophical anthropology," relatively little attention has been paid to his views on the emerging empirical science of anthropology. This paper examines Dilthey's relation to the new discipline by focusing on his reception of its leading German representatives. Using his book reviews, essays, and drafts for *Introduction to the Human Sciences* from the 1860s-70s, it highlights the influence of the new anthropology on his earliest attempts to elaborate the foundations of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. It argues that anthropology was a key source for some of the naturalistic features of Dilthey's philosophy, and that it pulled him in a direction contrary to the historicist hermeneutics of his teachers.

Keywords: Theodor Waitz; Adolf Bastian; hermeneutics; ethnology; historicism

1. Introduction

Anthropology occupies a prominent place in Dilthey's philosophy of socio-historical science. In *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (1883; henceforth *Introduction*) he makes clear its primacy in the system of the *Geisteswissenschaften*: "Understanding every aspect of history requires the application of all the resources of the various human sciences, beginning with anthropology" (GS I.94; SW I.143-4). The primacy of anthropology derives from the primacy of its object, the human being as such. Anthropology, together with psychology, renders an account of "these psychophysical life-units [*psychophysische Lebenseinheiten*]," and therewith "the basis of all knowledge of historical life" (GS I.29-32; SW I.81-3).

What did Dilthey take anthropology to be? On some occasions, he appears to conceive it as Kantian pragmatic anthropology or as Wolffian empirical psychology—a descriptive account of the capacities and patterns of behavior expressed in human life. In *Introduction*, Dilthey sometimes speaks of "anthropology and psychology" in the singular (GS I.32; SW I.83). In the

“Berlin Plan” notes for the unfinished second volume, he suggests that his own psychology should be understood in the eighteenth-century sense of empirical psychology or anthropology (GS XIX.308; SW I.467). Consequently, readers have typically identified Diltheyan anthropology with “descriptive and analytic psychology,” and the latter as a component of a broader metaphilosophical orientation sometimes termed “philosophical anthropology.”¹

Whether Dilthey’s mature work is well characterized as philosophical anthropology is not, however, the object of this paper. My aim instead is to examine Dilthey’s opinion of the empirical science of anthropology. During his lifetime, comparative anthropology, or ethnology, emerged as a separate discipline, which deliberately challenged the dominance of historicism in German *studia humanitatis* (Section Two). It was also a movement of which the early Dilthey took regular notice in his prolific journalism during the 1860s and 1870s (Section Three). But in what way the new anthropology might have informed Dilthey’s theory of socio-historical science

¹ Suter (1960, 73-85), Ermarth (1978, 141-3), Ineichen (1991, 169), and de Mul (2004, 136-7) all see psychology and anthropology in Dilthey as interchangeable labels amounting to philosophical anthropology. Textual appearances to the contrary are not hard to find. In notes from his last years, Dilthey maintains that anthropology is one among several sciences having mental phenomena as their object: “a *single* science of psychic life with its ever new scope and boundlessness does not exist [...] The approach that stands closest to psychic life is anthropology” (GS VII.331; SW VII.351). In “System of Ethics” (1890), Dilthey distinguishes an “anthropological-historical” from a “psychological-ethical” analysis for understanding social life (GS X.79; SW VI.104-5). Commenting on this text, Makkreel (2013, 132-5) notes a principled difference between psychology and anthropology, and indeed a turn from the former to the latter that parallels a shift, beginning with the Breslau Drafts, from epistemology to self-reflection. For Makkreel, what “System of Ethics” shows is that psychology, as Dilthey conceives it, ultimately serves an epistemological function insofar as its frame of reference is individual experience (or the individual’s “acquired psychic nexus”), whereas the kind of understanding that self-reflection aims at requires greater emphasis on the volitional and affective factors underpinning intersubjective life. Makkreel thus submits that, for Dilthey, “psycho-ethical understanding of the feelings and incentives that can motivate us to act must be rooted in anthropological analysis of our drives, instincts, and feelings.” The questions of whether, for Dilthey, “anthropology” and “psychology” name one and the same science, and whether the former label strictly designates philosophical anthropology remain open; see Rodi (2013) for a nuanced discussion of these issues.

has not received much attention.² As I shall argue, in Dilthey's early drafts toward the project of *Introduction*, anthropology is a source of key commitments familiar from the later work. These include his view that the mental and material aspects of human nature rest on a common ontological ground, that socio-cultural facts are partly conditioned by natural facts, and that, therefore, historical science must take fuller account of the natural-scientific perspective on human beings.³ Anthropology fueled Dilthey's project of a naturalistic philosophy of the human sciences, and in the 1860-70s pulled him toward a conception of inquiry significantly at odds with the hermeneutics for which he would later become known (Section Four).⁴

Compared to Dilthey's works from the 1880s onward, his early writings have attracted little scholarly interest. When they have been noticed, it has typically been either with a biographical interest or for the sake of finding anticipations of later positions. The impression one is left with is that Dilthey's path toward the central concerns of his critique of historical reason from the 1880s to the 1900s—above all, descriptive psychology and hermeneutics—was fairly smooth, even inevitable.⁵ This paper complicates that story and poses new problems. It

² Martinelli (2018) is the only recent examination of Dilthey's debts to an anthropologist (Theodor Waitz). None of the essays in the volume titled *Anthropologie und Geschichte* (2013) treat Dilthey's views on cultural anthropology. Bulhof (1980, 106) aptly observes that Dilthey's hermeneutics of history "stimulates a study of history as retrospective cultural anthropology," but does not investigate his relation to the discipline.

³ These themes are set out in the opening chapters of *Introduction*; e.g. GS I.16-8; SW I.67-70. That Dilthey stresses the continuity of the natural and human sciences has been noted recently by Hamid (2016), and Damböck (2017, 92-5).

⁴ The question of Dilthey's naturalism has received some attention in recent literature; e.g. Nelson (2013), Beiser (2014, 122), and Damböck (2017, 80). For present purposes, I agree with these scholars that certain features of Dilthey's work reasonably count as naturalistic, though my aim here is not to argue whether that slipperiest of labels felicitously applies to Dilthey.

⁵ Despite having painted a fine picture of Dilthey in his intellectual context, Ermarth (1978, 88) explains away the apparent "equivocations and reversals" in his work as "part of an effort to establish a new balance," whose crystallized expression becomes the theory and practice of *Verstehen*. De Mul (2004, 13-33) exemplifies the mainly biographical use of Dilthey's early

does so by calling attention to a tension in Dilthey's thought concerning the foundations of the *Geisteswissenschaften* in the period leading up to *Introduction*. As I show, Dilthey's wide-ranging activity in the 1860-70s reveals him to have been far more drawn to an anti-historicist model advocated by empirical anthropological researchers than is suggested by his image as an exponent of hermeneutics, who marked off the field of humanistic understanding of the socio-historical world from that of natural-scientific explanation of the physical. His youthful writings indicate the influence of a new empiricist movement in German social science as the source of a naturalistic perspective that, indeed, distinguishes Dilthey's mature theory of historical science from the classical humanism of his predecessors'. Reading the early Dilthey on his own terms thus raises new questions for interpreting the later. What were Dilthey's reasons for ultimately privileging the historicist aim of understanding individuality? And, given this aim, in what consists the continuing importance he attaches to empirical social science in his later account of historical inquiry? In explaining Dilthey's elliptical trajectory, the tradition of nineteenth-century German anthropology plays a hitherto underappreciated role.

2. Anthropology and history

The disciplinary origins of modern anthropology are complex. They involve developments since the eighteenth century in geology, archaeology, paleontology, and biology that led to dramatic shifts in European understandings of the temporal scale of the past, the diversity of human societies, and the fixity of species. Its institutional formation in Germany, however, has a clearer moment. 1869 marked the establishment of the *Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie*,

writings. Johach (1974, 40) recognizes a narrowing of the scope of the human sciences in Dilthey between 1875 and 1883, but does not inquire into the possible reasons for this shift.

Ethnologie und Urgeschichte (BGfAEU), a research and advocacy organization for a new kind of study of human nature. Founded by three academics trained in the natural sciences—the pathologist and botanist Rudolf Virchow (1821-1902), the physician Adolf Bastian (1826-1905), and the anatomist Robert Hartmann (1832-93)—the BGfAEU championed an alternative to the reigning philological humanism of German academia: a naturalistic approach based on physiological, ethnographic, and archaeological data gathered from a broader swath of humanity than is accessible from literary sources alone.⁶ The BGfAEU's principal outlets were the *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* (ZfE; est. 1869) and, crucially, the museum as a site outside the university campus where ethnographic materials could be gathered, organized, and studied. Under Bastian's directorship, the *Königliche Museum für Völkerkunde* was founded in 1873 and opened to the public in 1886. Hostility to textual hermeneutics was a centerpiece of the BGfAEU's platform. In the inaugural issue of the ZfE, Hartmann (1869, 32-4) criticized "the blind preference for 'historical method'" in cultural studies. He opposed to philological research the "natural-scientific method in ethnology," which encompasses physical characteristics, customs, and ritual practices of human beings.

The study of non-literate societies as a deeper source of evidence for human nature was a key feature of the ethnographic approach. A guiding assumption behind it was, as Dilthey formulated it in an 1876 review of English and French anthropological works, that "the condition of savages [*Wilden*] is not a condition of decay and degeneration, but rather is parallel to that

⁶ Within German humanism a debate concerning the use of non-textual remains had been initiated by Friedrich August Wolf (1759-1824), professor of classical philology at Halle and teacher of, among others, August Boeckh. In *Darstellung der Alterthums-Wissenschaft* (1807) Wolf proposed an archaeological hermeneutics whose objects included artworks, monuments, and *realia* pertaining to the everyday life of ancient Greek and Roman society. See Miller (2017, 99-122) for discussion of the debate centering on Wolf and Boeckh.

which all branches of humankind have passed through in a certain stage [of their development]” (GS XVII.11). The new anthropology subscribed to the evolutionist hypothesis that all human societies run through a law-governed sequence comprising determinate stages of cultural development.⁷ This hypothesis supported analogical inferences from better-known stages of development of one society to lesser-known, parallel stages of a different one. Hence, the life of the so-called *Naturvölker* acquired importance as data for reasoning about the deep past of European peoples.⁸

Theodor Waitz’s (1821-64) *Anthropologie der Naturvölker* (vols. 1-4, 1859-64; vols. 5-6, 1865-72) was the most systematic attempt of its time to place non-literate societies at the center of the new discipline. Trained as a classical philologist, he turned toward psychology and anthropology beginning with *Grundlegung der Psychologie* (1846), a programmatic work aimed at setting psychology on physiological footing.⁹ By the early 1850s Waitz had directed his focus to anthropology. He himself never conducted fieldwork, and instead pieced together his *Anthropologie* by making extensive use of ethnographic reports—Dilthey declared him “the most careful and critical mind” among contemporary anthropologists (GS XVII.9). The first volume of *Anthropologie* sets out the theoretical foundations of the discipline.

⁷ “Evolutionism” here does not refer to Darwinian biological evolution—indeed, Waitz, Bastian, Virchow, and Hartmann roundly rejected Darwinism. As a theory of cultural development, evolutionism grew out of eighteenth-century stadial or “conjectural” theories of history, whose proponents included Montesquieu and Rousseau in France, Smith and Stewart in Scotland, and Herder in Germany. For eighteenth-century stadialism and its contributions to the development of anthropology, see Palmeri (2016). On Herder’s role in German anthropological thought, see Zammito (2002).

⁸ The term “*Naturvolk*” originates in the eighteenth century. It occurs in Johann Christoph Adelung’s *Wörterbuch* (1774-86), and is also used by Herder. It refers roughly to what Europeans conceived, whether romantically or pejoratively, as “primitive” or “savage” peoples: in Adelung’s definition, those “living in the state of nature, without any noticeable civil constitution.” I leave the term untranslated.

⁹ See Martinelli (2018, 500-4) for Waitz’s life and career.

Waitz begins by noting an unfortunate conflict between three opinions concerning the study of humanity. The first is that of the “zoologist” and of “natural scientists” (*Naturforschern*) in general, who regard the human being “as the most organized parasite of the Earth.” The second is a theological one, which treats humans as occupying a privileged position between God and nature. A third viewpoint identifies the human and divine spirit, “the same one and absolute spirit which [...] only reaches the goal of its development in the human being as the sole agent of divine self-consciousness.” The first, he concludes, “entirely subordinates” man to nature; the second does so in part; and the third places him “entirely above nature” (1859, 1-2). Against these dogmatic positions, Waitz proposes anthropology as a more open-ended alternative. Anthropology should be a foundational discipline unifying the physical and spiritual sciences of the human being—specifically, anatomy, physiology, and psychology with “cultural history” (*Culturgeschichte*). The task of anthropology is to “ask ourselves what has collectively been achieved in all these areas in order to know the nature of man and whether the results obtained complement one another” (4).

This mediating function of anthropology is not evenly balanced between physical and historical interests. It is oriented more toward understanding human sociality, thus more toward the part of human nature that concerns the historian than that which concerns the naturalist: “Anthropology has to apprehend man precisely at the point of his transition from isolation to social life and to investigate the conditions and consequences of his further development” (1859, 7). In arguing for a new approach, Waitz takes aim at the consensus of German humanism, that historical inquiry is only possible where written records exist. This inevitably limits the scope of historical science to the study of societies “where writing is available, where certain beginnings of civilization are on hand.” So understood, history deals only with the counterpart of

Naturvölker, or the *Kulturnationen*: those groups that have produced written records and therefore, on the humanist view, count as having produced culture. For Waitz, such an approach to history furnishes a one-sided conception of the human being, and stands in need of completion through “the consideration of culture-less people [*culturlosen Völker*] and the natural state [*Naturzustande*] of human beings.” Anthropology aspires to embrace all of humanity as constituting a single species of animal, to outline “the natural history of human society [...] in a given land and under given stationary external conditions” (8). By “investigating the affinities of particular peoples and tribes [...] anthropology approaches the history of humankind itself” (10). Waitz thus conceives anthropology as a science of the human being as an essentially cultural-historical creature. It aims to synthesize the results of psychophysics, philology, and ethnographic observation in order to overcome the limitations of existing approaches to the study of human nature. Waitz shares the philosophical historian’s concern to understand the multifarious character of human nature, and offers a new framework with a broader evidentiary base as a corrective.

From his relative isolation in Marburg, Waitz did not have an immediate impact on the development of German anthropology, though the first volume of his *Anthropologie* did attract the attention of the Anthropological Society of London, which in its inaugural year had it published under the title *Introduction to Anthropology* (1863). A more influential and politically well-connected current, meanwhile, was taking shape in Berlin around Virchow, Hartmann and, most significantly, Bastian.¹⁰

¹⁰ Zimmerman (2001, 38-61) offers a helpful account centering on Bastian of the emergence of German ethnology as a reaction to academic humanism.

Trained as a physician, Bastian followed in the footsteps of Alexander von Humboldt by traveling extensively, first in the 1850s as a ship's doctor and later as a professional ethnologist. The materials gathered on these voyages informed his copious, if notoriously unreadable, ethnographic writings as well as his views on the aims and methods of ethnology, which he laid out in theoretical works such as *Der Mensch in der Geschichte* (1860), *Die Vorgeschichte der Ethnologie* (1881), and *Ethnische Elementargedanken in der Lehre vom Menschen* (1895). In 1866 the University of Berlin awarded Bastian an honorary doctorate, thus permitting him to offer courses in ethnology and anthropology, the first of their kind in Germany. Of still wider consequence for the social legitimation of the new discipline was Bastian and the BGfAEU's campaign to establish a state-funded ethnological museum as a new forum for the study of humanity, whose main resource would be a catalogue of *realia*, completed questionnaires, and oral traditions gathered by field researchers. "In these museums," wrote Bastian, "the spiritual life of *Naturvölker* in its embodiments should be presented" (1881, 63).

Like Waitz, Bastian conceived anthropology in close relation to psychology as the study of human nature, particularly with a view to how this nature produces culture. Bastian hailed psychology as "the science of the future," but only insofar as it "traces out not only the development of the individual but rather that of humankind [as a whole]," thereby becoming the science that investigates the basis of all history (1860, xii-xiii). Dilthey credits Bastian with coining the happy label "comparative psychology" for this enterprise (GS XVII.287). Also, like Waitz, Bastian saw the reigning historicism as inadequate to the task. He criticized the historians' narrow focus on the great monuments of art and philosophy and, consequently, on elite culture while ignoring the quotidian. Anthropology, by contrast, aimed at a more encompassing view of historical development beyond literate Eurasian societies, using field

observation of *Naturvölker* and material remains of ancient societies as equally, if not more, valuable sources for the study of humanity. Further, Bastian emphasized the superiority of inductive and statistical methods over philological ones. He declared the task of ethnology to lie “precisely in strengthening the inductive side of the treatment of history (in the widest sense of human history),” which is to be brought about “by advancing the study of comparative psychology by means of the lowest and simplest forms of cultural ideas [*Völkergedanken*] in order to recognize more clearly the elements of the basic laws [in this domain].” An inductive approach that took into account “the simplest and lowest organisms of human society” promised to better elucidate the meaning even of the “higher” cultural products that were the historians’ focus (1881, 60-2).

Underlying Bastian’s vision of ethnology was a theoretical construct every bit as speculative as those of the metaphysicians against whom he railed. Already in *Der Mensch in der Geschichte*, and more extensively in *Ethnische Elementargedanken*, Bastian laid out the project of a “statistics of ideas” (*Gedankenstatistik*) based on distinguishing and classifying “elementary” and “cultural” ideas (*Elementargedanken*, *Völkergedanken*). “Elementary ideas,” according to Bastian, constitute a universal set of semantic primitives implicit in all human thinking. From these semantic primitives are constructed sets of “cultural ideas,” which vary across social groups due to differences in their historical and geographical conditions (*geographische Provinzen*) (1895, 187-93). Notably, for Bastian, these ideas are expressed not only in language but in all manner of behavior, at both the individual and collective levels. Not only written records and oral traditions but also everyday habits, manners, gestures, and rituals as well as material artifacts, from tools and weapons to clothing and cutlery, express human nature in structures of primitive and constructed ideas. This standpoint on individual and group

psychology motivates, for Bastian, a statistical treatment of objects, textual and non-textual. The ultimate goal of his hectic accumulation of ethnographic materials is a *Gedankenstatistik*, which should result from “the cooperation of all forces in the Republic of Letters.” Producing data sets for such an analysis of the elements of human thought and of their diachronic combinations under varying external conditions demands “purely objective and, as far as possible, impartial observation” of the cultural products of the most diverse peoples (1860, xvi-xviii).

For Bastian and his collaborators, the demand for objectivity in the human sciences translated into a preference for the material and a distrust of the written word, especially of the more rarefied literary expressions, as sources of knowledge of human nature. It also meant abandoning the scholarly ideal of the gifted hermeneut in favor of a collectivist ideal of research. His erstwhile teacher Virchow (1886, 69) advocated for the superior value of material remains as, “a factual, objective archive on which every researcher can independently draw,” as opposed to “a printed one, as historians can provide,” the evidential value of which is invariably infected with authorial motives. For members of the BGfAEU, even Moses Lazarus and Chaim Steinthal, the otherwise sympathetic proponents of another contemporaneous movement—*Völkerpsychologie*—that sought to expand the scope of the human sciences, appeared to be both too wedded to language and engaged in misguided pursuit of spiritual essences.

Lazarus and Steinthal, in fact, were members of the BGfAEU in the early 1870s and participated in its meetings. In an 1872 lecture to the society, “Die sprachwissenschaftliche Richtung der Ethnologie,” Steinthal argued for the usefulness of comparative linguistics for ethnological taxonomy. His encounter on this occasion with Bastian is particularly revealing of the new anthropologists’ distrust of privileging language, and of why the *Völkerpsychologen* soon parted company with the BGfAEU. Steinthal’s argument rested on an analogy with

morphology as a taxonomical principle in botany and zoology: just as affinities and differences in the exterior forms of organisms serve for the classification of species, cultures might be classified on the basis of affinities in linguistic form. He conceded to his opponents the limitations of language: “One understands language only from nature, where it has developed, and from spirit, from which it pours forth.” Words only acquire meaning in a material context, and he thus concurs with the anthropologists that the “investigation of a culture should begin with material relations among which its spirit has developed, and language is only one spiritual factor among many others.” Yet, Steinthal advanced several reasons for granting linguistics a preeminent place within ethnology. For one thing, even though language depends on nature, for the ethnologist it is the “widest path” toward knowledge of the spirit of a people (*Volksgeist*), since without language it would be impossible to penetrate its religion or world-view. For another, Steinthal argued that language is not merely a “means of representation” but rather “the most primitive product of spirit, which directly influences all further products.” For Steinthal, language conditions all other cultural expressions, so that non-textual cultural products only become evidence for a *Volksgeist* once they are interpreted through a representational framework that we recognize as linguistic (1872, 94-6). In his brief rebuttal, Bastian dismissed Steinthal’s argument, declaring that, while language is certainly important for psychology, it is not recommended as a tool for ethnological classification since it “only provides an uncertain standard because it is itself a variable one.” Bastian remained skeptical that the tremendous diversity of cultural forms could be satisfactorily modeled on the basis of linguistic form, predicting that such “philosophical groupings” will not easily “pass the test of induction,” once enough materials have been gathered (1872, 99). More fundamentally, Bastian dismissed, as

would Dilthey, the very notion of a *Volksgeist* as a legitimate theoretical construct for which any kind of data, linguistic or otherwise, could constitute evidence.¹¹

Around 1870, then, anthropologists exuded optimism that research into non-textual sources could set the study of humanity on scientific footing. Bastian and his colleagues emphasized the task of amassing ever larger ethnographic collections, organized with a minimum of interpretive involvement on the part of the scholar. The supreme aspiration of the ethnologist should be to let human nature display itself, as it were, in museum galleries. The academic humanist establishment, for its part, viewed both the methods and the subject matter of the new discipline with skepticism, and sometimes outright disdain.

In his 1857 lectures on historical method, Johann Gustav Droysen (1808-84) defended the position that only those societies that have participated in the cultural progress of humanity are relevant to the historian. The study of *Naturvölker* might hold interest for the ethnographer but it can safely be disregarded in the project of understanding the essence of humanity, which consists in progress and is only realized in civilized life (1977, 380). For Droysen, the idea of *Naturvölker* was exactly opposed to that of *Kulturvölker*. Culture only arose once human beings had broken free of their dependence on nature, and only where culture existed did history, rather than a mere temporal flow of events, exist. From this perspective, the “primitive peoples” at the center of the new anthropology were static communities without any cultural development. They were thus peoples without history and, consequently, to be excluded from historical science. For Droysen, the ethnographical approach amounted to “one of the worst [*übelsten*] applications of

¹¹ Much has been written in recent years on *Völkerpsychologie* and on Dilthey’s criticism of Lazarus and Steinthal. I do not return to the topic in what follows, focusing instead on the anthropologists. In the 1870s Dilthey clearly distinguishes the two programs, appearing sympathetic toward anthropology while dismissing *Völkerpsychologie*; e.g. GS XVIII.217-8. For Dilthey’s reception of *Völkerpsychologie*, see Feest (2007), and Kusch (2019).

the natural-scientific method”; he singled out Bastian as being “schematic, doctrinaire, and unhistorical” (1977, 311-2).¹²

A clear distinction between nature and culture thus lay at the heart of historicism, and lent support to its practitioners’ concern with individuality as the object of their inquiry. In virtue of the atypicality exhibited in their development, cultured societies furnish the human sciences with a special task. The study of civilization cannot aim at the mere discovery of causal regularities, but rather its ultimate objects must be great individuals—whether persons, states, or cultural movements—whose significance resides in having advanced the course of humanity through their creative freedom, and is preserved in great works of art, philosophy, and religion. On this view of the difference between so-called primitive and civilized societies, the former are suited to a strictly causal inquiry, which seeks to represent their general patterns of behavior and ways of living, whereas the latter require a science that grasps what is singular and unique, be it in the spirit of a culture—as, for example, in Jacob Burckhardt’s study of the Italian Renaissance—or of its great persons—as in Droysen’s account of Alexander. Unsurprisingly, given its centrality to the historical school, the nature/culture distinction was a key target of the anthropologists’ critique. A crucial plank of the BGfAEU’s platform was the rejection of the purported epistemological and methodological value of the dichotomy. Accordingly, they insisted on elevating material studies to the stature commonly accorded to textual studies, and limited themselves to the task of describing general patterns in the social, religious, or political lives of various groups of human beings as opposed to discerning the creative power of great individuals.

¹² See Mehr (2009, 83-123) for an account of the debate around the view that cultural history begins with human beings’ emancipation from nature, covering Waitz and Bastian, among other opponents of the historicist position. Droysen’s view is not idiosyncratic but is shared by leading humanists of the nineteenth century; see Zimmerman (2001, 41-44).

In the middle decades of the nineteenth century anthropology remained firmly in the shadows of the textualist-historicist paradigm in German humanities. Nevertheless, it was by no means invisible, and attracted the interest of a new generation of scholars grappling with the intellectual crises of the period. Among them was the young Dilthey, who took regular notice of the latest work in anthropology in the 1860s and 1870s, just as his own project of a critique of historical reason was beginning to take shape.

3. Dilthey and the anthropologists

Between his student years in Berlin until his return there in 1882, Dilthey was a prolific contributor of essays, book reviews, and biographical sketches for various periodicals. He reviewed Waitz's *Anthropologie* twice—in 1863 for *Berliner Allgemeine Zeitung*, and the second edition in 1877 for *Westermanns Monatshefte*. Also for the latter, he reviewed in 1867 Bastian's *Reisen im östlichen Asien*, vols. 1-2; in 1879 *Die Kulturländer des alten Amerika*; and in 1868 contributed a long-form essay, "Adolf Bastian. Ein Anthropolog und Ethnolog als Reisender." Besides these, Dilthey reviewed in 1873 Edward Tylor's *The Beginnings of Culture*; in 1876 John Lubbock's *The Origin of Civilisation*, François Lenormant's *Les premières civilisation*, Robert Hartmann's *Die Nigritier. Eine anthropologisch-ethnologische Monographie*, and Herbert Spencer's *The Study of Sociology*; in 1877 Oskar Peschel's *Völkerkunde*, and Chaim Steinthal's *Die Ursprung der Sprache*; and in 1879 Georg Schweinfurth's *Im Herzen von Afrika*. This body of work evinces broad agreement with, alongside selected criticisms of, the aims and methods of anthropology.

With respect to the subject matter of the new discipline, Dilthey shares the anthropologists' view of the importance of ethnographic studies of non-literate societies. In his

1863 review of Waitz, he writes that, “if one wants to encompass the bounds of human nature, it will be essential to arrive at our inquiry into the *Naturvölker*.” The shortcoming of Enlightenment anthropology, Dilthey contends, was a lack of knowledge of the diversity of forms of human life, which led authors such as Rousseau to a romanticized, “dreamlike picture” (*träumerisches Bild*) of the noble savage. What is needed instead is “exact inquiry” into human nature in its various forms and developmental stages, a view he repeats in his 1877 review of the second edition (GS XVI.373-4; XVII.153). Dilthey reaffirms this opinion in his 1868 essay on Bastian. Ethnological facts, he observes, consist of two groups: “One comprises the study of the cultureless [*der kulturlosen*] or *Naturvölker*; the second only that of cultured nations [*Kulturnationen*]. It is clear how crucial for our research of the human being the first study must be” (XI.206). In an 1876 review of Lubbock and Lenormant, he deems the new discipline a further expansion of historical studies. Having begun with Greco-Roman antiquity, then having moved in the Romantic period to the early history of the Germanic peoples, it is now possible to reconstruct more distinctly the long developmental arc of human culture using the combined resources of natural science, ethnography, and archaeology. For this reason, Dilthey declares that, “[a]mong the sciences that recent decades have brought forth *comparative anthropology* assumes a preeminent position.” In the progress of the human sciences, the challenge to classical humanism is not lost on Dilthey. Whereas “when a writer of the previous century spoke of human beings he thought in the first place of the highest moments of European development,” it is now imperative to “unlearn” (*verlernen*) that generation’s preconceptions regarding humanity’s origins and development (XVII.8).

Dilthey especially approves of Waitz’s efforts to bridge the divide between nature and culture that lies at the root of the conflict between anthropology and academic humanism. In

laying the foundations for the study of *Naturvölker*, Waitz judiciously distinguishes, according to Dilthey, the question of the unity of the human species from that of common descent, arguing affirmatively for the former while leaving the latter open. Although unity of species follows from unity of descent, the two concepts are not convertible, since the notion of species in general has to do only with similarities in characteristics, in both the organic and inorganic realms, whereas descent involves causal sequence. With this move, Waitz sidesteps the controversial topic of whether humankind originated from ancestral species, while bringing that of its synchronic unity, or of a common human nature once it has come into being, “into the realm of a strictly investigated anthropology” (GS XVI.374; cf. Waitz 1863, 21-22). On the basis of comparative ethnography, Waitz offers “an empirical concept of the human being” characterized by four universal features. As Dilthey summarizes it, in the first place, human beings learn from past experiences in a much more comprehensive way than do animals. Second, humans express their inner life partly through language and partly through other means, thus by employing multiple modes to communicate internal states. Third, human societies are universally marked by law, social hierarchies, and a deeper dependence than other animals on family and community. Finally, to the concept of the human being belongs belief in divinity, “which stands above and under natural things and steers them at will” (XVI.378). To Dilthey, regardless of the causal origins of humankind, Waitz’s work shows that “a great number of facts speak for the unity of the human species, none however disprove it” (XVII.154).

The supposition of the synchronic unity of humankind lends support to the hypothesis that its cultural development is a law-governed process, and variation in the developmental histories of societies is partly a function of variation in external circumstances. This hypothesis licenses analogical inferences between societies at different stages of cultural development, and

Dilthey has a favorable view of its use. He deems it legitimate for explaining, for instance, extant practices that are in apparent contradiction to present-day notions or values, “as vestiges of a long past epoch with whose other ideas and arrangements they had a clear and distinct connection” (GS XVII.9). Similarly, in his 1867 review of Bastian’s *Reisen im östlichen Asien*, he applauds his expedition to Southeast Asia as being “of the highest significance for our western culture” on account of its potential for deepening understanding of religion as such. The religious life of Southeast Asian cultures, having developed with relatively little interaction with those in the historical orbit of Europe, “permits a sharp control for the laws to be inferred from them in the study of their relations” (GS XVII.287). Dilthey’s 1868 essay on Bastian likewise defends the validity of this method for understanding cultural systems. The object of the comparative study of religion is the nature of religiosity in general, to “discover a lawful and uninterrupted connection from the faintest intuitions of religion among the *Naturvölker* to the most sublime ones of our time.” To this end, Dilthey agrees with Bastian that it is important “to start from the simplest conditions, the primitive cellular structure of religious life, in a manner of speaking” (GS XI.210).

Dilthey acknowledges the limited ends to which such reasoning is suited. Again, he finds himself in agreement with Bastian, that the proximate purpose of these hypotheses is not the construction of encompassing theories but only the organization of empirical data. He commends Bastian’s ideal of the honest ethnologist, who resists drawing any conclusions except those which “are irrefutably compelled by the facts,” and who is “careful not to want to deceive himself with the artificial smoothness of a system.” In other words, the first business of an *Erfahrungswissenschaft* of the socio-historical world is the collection and ordering of facts. At this stage of his career, Dilthey harbors a good deal of optimism about a future of the human

sciences led by anthropological methods. He concludes his Bastian essay by laying out such a vision:

For long enough philosophy has wandered about the labyrinths of its own meditations. Now, however, the horizons of research have widened immeasurably; history, ethnology, anthropology offer enormous material for true induction [...] Only when the construction of a science of spiritual appearances has begun will we be able to judge rightly, indeed perhaps [will judge] less worthy, the cloud-palaces [*Wolkenpaläste*] of Schellingian, Hegelian speculation. (GS XI.212)

Dilthey's enthusiasm for ethnology and its allied sciences of physical anthropology and archaeology persists throughout the 1870s. Yet, toward the end of his time in Breslau, he also grows critical of certain features of this program. His 1879 review of Bastian's *Die Kulturländer des alten Amerika* conveys skepticism specifically about the project of a *Gedankenstatistik*.

Dilthey sees Bastian's ultimate goal as being to establish the study of humanity on the "broad basis of comprehensive ethnology." For Bastian, data collected from field research furnishes material for "psychological inductions" with which the study of mental life would extend beyond the horizon of individual experience. In a certain sense, the goal is the same as that of "philosophy of history," namely an encompassing view of cultural development from its ground in human nature. That is, Bastian aims to understand what (Dilthey quotes him) "ferments in the layers of microcosmic depths and more or less eludes clear insight" by attending to the outward expressions, "the macrocosmic magnifications," of its underlying psychological forces, namely the objectifications of human nature in religious beliefs, legal systems, and rites and customs. The difference, however, between Schelling's or Hegel's investigations of these objectifications and Bastian's consists in differences between their objects and methods. First,

Bastian's project is not restricted to the objectifications of the life of *Kulturvölker*. And second, Bastian seeks to determine the laws of human development by means of a calculus (*Rechnungsmethode*), which would "embrace the totality of human ideas from the simplest forms to the highest and most complex" on the basis of both universal and culturally conditioned semantic units inferred from comparative analysis (GS XVII.377-8). To be sure, Dilthey has reservations about such a statistical analysis of the socio-historical world. Bastian's "murky thought," he suspects, leads back in the direction of Leibniz's plan for a universal characteristic, the old dream of discovering a calculus of thought, which would "permit the use of mathematics on thought complexes [*Gedankenmassen*]" (XVII.378). For Dilthey, this aim loses sight of the fundamental reality of the individual as the locus of cultural-historical meaning. Despite his continuing appreciation for Bastian's tireless ethnographic work, Dilthey is unwilling to follow him down the path of reducing mental life to statistical laws.

Thus, Dilthey's generally favorable view of anthropology is tempered by doubts about its ability to resolve fully the central philosophical problem of the human sciences: that of the sense and meaning of history. While persuaded of anthropology's promise for the sciences of society and culture, he rejects the thought that subjecting ethnographic data to mathematical treatment could yield a satisfactory science of human nature. It is perhaps such dissatisfaction that results in a broader redirection, around 1880, of his foundational aim toward a general science of consciousness, which eventually gives rise to the project of describing and analyzing the inner structure of psychophysical individuals.

Dilthey's estimation of anthropology in his reviews is reflected in his earliest drafts for *Introduction*, to which we now turn.

4. Anthropology in Dilthey's early theory of the human sciences

Alongside the steady output of intellectual journalism, Dilthey began to conceive his project of the foundations of the human sciences. In the 1860s-70s, he uses a variety of labels for this undertaking: “empirical science of the human mind” (*Erfahrungswissenschaft des menschlichen Geistes*), “historical research with philosophical intent” (*historische Forschung in philosophischer Absicht*), as well as “critique of historical knowledge” (*Kritik der historischen Erkenntnis*) (GS V.27; V.35; XVIII.14). Dilthey's earliest sketches of a philosophy of the *Geisteswissenschaften* date from shortly after receiving his doctorate in Berlin. Further sets from 1871 and 1874 are drafts for the 1875 essay, “Über das Studium der Geschichte der Wissenschaften vom Menschen, der Gesellschaft und dem Staat.”¹³ These documents display the affinity of his early project with the new anthropology in its commitment to founding a rigorous science of human nature insofar as it is accessible in its manifold expressions. In contrast to his later emphasis on understanding individuals, his concern in this period is the determinability of relations among actors and events. He also has a suitably broad view of the data for historical research, which include artifacts and practices in addition to literary sources, as indicated in student notes on his 1867-68 lecture course in Basel: “What is available to us is remnants, parts of the historical events of the past. We have heaps of ruins, fairy tales, customs, and a few reports about political affairs” (GS XX.110; SW IV.233).

In the 1865-66 drafts, Dilthey sets out his philosophical objective as being to bring the human sciences to self-consciousness of their foundations: “It aims only to obtain the point of view from which the way in which phenomena are originally given to us and first assimilated is

¹³ See Johach (1974, 14n24) for the provenance of the manuscripts. He highlights Dilthey's emphasis in this essay on the social and practical dimensions of human life, and concomitant criticism of individual psychology as a basis for the human sciences.

appreciated, so that the human sciences recognize the ground where they stand” (GS XVIII.2). He sets aside methodological questions, leaving them as internal matters to be determined by practice. He sees the novelty of his approach as consisting in “combining the study of the human being with that of history,” thus implicitly distinguishing the study of human nature as such from the study of historical development. The proposed union of the two inquiries is premised on certain conditions. The first among these is that “the truths used for the study of history should have at least the same evidence as [truths used in the study of the human being].” That is, cultural-historical research should conform to the same evidentiary standards that regulate, for instance, anatomy or psychophysics. It thus rules out speculative histories, which advance claims about the overall course of historical development on insufficient empirical grounds. A second desideratum is to avoid ultimate explanations. The appropriate goal for a human scientist is to identify at each stage new directions of research, and to treat all results as provisional. For Dilthey, these conditions amount to a “moderated skepticism,” an intellectual attitude befitting an empirical researcher (XVIII.3).

In this project, psychology and anthropology play the role of establishing the factual basis of humanistic inquiry. For Dilthey, the subject matter of the sciences of society and culture consists in the relation of the contents of consciousness to the external world on the one hand, and to individual participants in that world on the other. As he insists throughout his career, these facts of consciousness are not only cognitive but also affective and volitional. Regular sequences of variable and invariable mental contents constitute the objective socio-historical world, or the world of human affairs insofar as it can be scientifically studied. Anthropology and psychology’s task is to establish these regularities—how, for example, certain types of perceptions are accompanied by certain types of feelings, or how certain motives track certain actions—“entirely

empiristically” (XVIII.4-5). This amounts to articulating the conditions in human nature of the possibility of cultural life: mental contents and their correlated outward expressions, which Dilthey defines as the totality of culture; and diachronic relations of cultural facts, which constitute the course of history. As opposed to narrative or “artistic” histories, the goal of historical science as envisaged here is to reconstruct dynamical relations in the development of culture on the basis of empirical data. At the same time, what is not the aim of any human science is an explanation of culture, or a reduction of cultural-historical facts to their mental causes, a state of knowledge that would yield “a completed science of history” (GS XVIII.7-8). In his insistence that history should be scientific rather than artistic, Dilthey certainly follows the main current of the German historical school, centered above all on Ranke, which valorized dispassionate source criticism as the core of historical method and an objective view of the past as its aim.¹⁴ Yet, Dilthey also departs in important respects from his historicist teachers.

For one thing, Dilthey is attracted to the anthropologists’ insistence on broadening the evidential base of historical inquiry for the sake of objectivity. In the structures of consciousness that ground cultural-historical facts, Dilthey singles out for especial treatment volitional relations in their multifarious expressions. The sciences of “acting human beings” (*handelnde Menschen*) have their common root in “external developments grounded in the practical side of human beings,” thus in phenomena resulting from relationships among volitional agents. In particular, these are the phenomena expressed in various forms of association—from political institutions to

¹⁴ The opposed current is represented by figures such as Friedrich Christoph Schlosser (1776-1861) and his student Georg Gottfried Gervinus (1805-71). The latter produced a *Grundzüge der Historik*, a manual aimed at “the artistic [*künstlerische*] treatment of history” that should make history relevant for life (1837, Preface). The approach met with Ranke’s firm disapproval, who retorted that, in order for history to intervene in the present, as Gervinus wishes, “it must first of all be science” (1872, 142).

community organizations to family systems (GS XVIII.35-6). The invariant features of such “organization of wills” comprise what Dilthey calls “the relational forms of the practical world” (*Beziehungsformen der praktischen Welt*). The “moral-political sciences,” as he sometimes labels them in this period, approach the historical world principally insofar as it is constituted by such objectifications of communal life as vehicles of practical interests and motives. As these practical motives originate in presumptively free agents and result in actions that have to be recognized as being to some degree contingent, this circumstance inevitably complicates the task of attaining objectivity, shared alike by the historical school and the anthropologists (XVIII.10).

In addressing the problem of objectivity—“the goal of the labor of all true historical minds”—the young Dilthey moves toward a standpoint in which the status of the individual epoch or person is considerably diminished. While accepting what Beiser (2011, 4) calls historicism’s principle of individuality—“that the defining subject matter of history, and the goal of historical enquiry, is the individual”—the early Dilthey diverges from it inasmuch as he emphasizes investigation into the external relations in the socio-historical manifold as the only realizable aim of inquiry. He accepts as a basic condition of any rigorous historical science that it must investigate the causal relations in the “tangle of historical facts.” Taking the history of science as his example, Dilthey observes that inquiry into the causes of scientific development requires the historian to set aside individual thinkers and their systems and instead treat the development of a scientific discipline as an independent structure of propositions for which “the individuality of its founder is in the first instance irrelevant.” This leads him to propose the following law of historiography: “there is an order of truths according to which they occur and follow one another, which is independent of all other factors, be they of society or of individuality, and which alone conditions them through the relation of reciprocal dependence of

these truths” (GS XVIII.10). Put differently, determinate order among socio-historical facts is a presupposition of historical science in much the same way that determinate order among physical facts is a presupposition of natural science. The goal of objectivity in the human sciences just is to grasp the order of truths in the historical manifold.

But a further condition is required for objectivity. For history is not conceived as a static field of appearances but as a development from one stage of culture to another. For Dilthey, this presupposes, for one thing, that mental contents are transmissible between individuals and across generations, which in turn requires that certain material and social conditions obtain. Only where a connection between such cultural stages (*Kulturstufen*) has occurred does historical inquiry become possible, for the historian may then reasonably seek to discover “advancement or progression” from one era to the next. Dilthey thus proposes a second law: “the condition for progress in the order of truths is their adequate transmission to a generation, and insofar as culture is a condition for this purpose, the realization of the order of truths is dependent on the state of culture” (GS XVIII.10-1). With this condition the role of “great minds,” of actors that wield disproportionate influence in the course of development, comes to the fore. What Dilthey nevertheless emphasizes as the target of inquiry—in marked contrast to his later emphasis on biography for conveying the “most fundamental historical fact” (I.33)—are the external facts of social structures and practices that serve as conduits of cultural influence, rather than the inner nexus of beliefs, drives, and motives of great individuals. Consequently, he frames the problem of historical progress, as opposed to that of culture as such, with specific reference to anthropology: “To what extent can the invariable in the elements on which progress is built be established determinately through comparative anthropology?” (XVIII.12). While necessarily conditioned by individual psychology, the object of scientific history is first of all the network of

relations in the social-psychological whole produced by human activity, thus the world as framed in ethnology.¹⁵

What follows is an extraordinary sketch of the ontological ground on which this view of objectivity might rest. In a section titled, “The investigation of psychical life in its distribution over the Earth,” Dilthey constructs a model of the geography of human mental life (*geistiges Leben*) as a total psychical or mental mass (*geistige Masse*) present on the Earth at any moment (he sets aside plant and non-human animal life after acknowledging their possible participation in the same whole only for the reason that their expressions are too difficult for us to investigate).¹⁶ The notion of mental mass differs from that of spatial masses, inasmuch as it comprises a system of intensive rather than extensive magnitudes. Like spatial masses, however, it permits quantification, since intensities of psychical acts can be assigned magnitudes, as colors have degrees of saturation and tones degrees of pitch. Thus, “just as the external world is treated as a system of measurable motions, so the mental world turns out to be a system of psychical acts, which, in virtue of their intensities, can be treated quantitatively and as a whole, as a mass.” Dilthey grants that individual human beings remain the ultimate subjects of these acts. Yet, this subjective source of the actions making up the socio-historical world remains for us “a dark ground.” We can think of it, he supposes, as a reservoir of psychical force that produces its effects either directly or by being converted to physiological force. But whether its causality is

¹⁵ This thought has a late echo in Dilthey’s life, as reported by Misch: “Life comprises the connection between the individual and the whole as a dynamical relation. The entire content of this relation is the object of anthropology” (GS V.liii).

¹⁶ The editors of GS XVIII note that a later heading to the manuscript in Dilthey’s hand reads “Schema of the third book [of *Introduction*]” (XVIII.216n19). At some point, likely before 1883, Dilthey thus considered including such a naturalistic model of the basis of social-psychological phenomena as groundwork for the epistemological foundations of the *Geisteswissenschaften* in the envisioned Books Four to Six of *Introduction*.

material or spiritual in nature, and how it produces its effects, is both mysterious and irrelevant to the historian. The historical researcher can only fruitfully inquire into “the system of these actual acts as a sure framework for the psychical mass of the Earth” (GS XVIII.13).¹⁷

Dilthey admits limitations to the quantitative analysis of psychical activity in different times and places. Yet, these limitations are not due to the nature of its source, as if the mental were inherently opaque to inquiry and the material inherently transparent. Rather, according to Dilthey, compared to the study of matter in motion the difficulty in the case of social-psychological phenomena lies in the increasingly fragmentary character of our evidence as we move into the more distant past. He even suggests that a law of conservation of psychological force parallel to that of physical force is a coherent possibility, that “just as the quantity of motion is unchangeable, so also [the quantity] of the psychical in the world-whole were always the same and only the forms in which it is expressed change.” Nevertheless, such a principle cannot yet be assumed. What is certain is that the distribution of mental life on Earth varies, and hence only “the fixed relationship of these [psychical] masses to determinable conditions” can serve as a stable foundation of historical development (GS XVIII.14).

Articulating such relationships is a basic task on behalf of the human sciences that falls above all to anthropology. Dilthey proceeds to outline its steps, beginning with determining the movement patterns of human populations. One leading assumption he makes is that the primary driver of human activity is the desire for the satisfaction of needs (*Befriedigung der Bedürfnisse*), which partly underpins the geographical distribution of human beings. Again, a mechanical model is present here: “Comparable to a water system [*Wassernetz*], streams of population pour

¹⁷ An echo of the image of a total quantity of psychic life persists in *Introduction*, where Dilthey speaks of its study as a “psychophysics of society”; GS I.114, SW I.164.

themselves in the direction of the easiest satisfaction of needs over the Earth.” The process of population distribution across regions leads to the genealogical branching of human beings. Such divisions are conditioned, on the one hand, by biological laws of heredity and development and, on the other, by the “inner relationships between mentally moved [*geistig bewegter*] organisms” that constitute families, tribes, and nations, based on relations of dependence and love. As populations get articulated into affinity groups, which we may call “ethnic” or “cultural,” they give rise to distinctive systems of gestures and languages, forms of association, and laws and customs (GS XVIII.14-5; cf. XVIII.36-7).¹⁸ Underneath this complex process stand, of course, psychophysical individuals. Yet, Dilthey reiterates that scientific history must concern itself narrowly with the comparative study of their external forms of language, law, or religion. In other words, its anchor is ethnography. In an echo of the 1868 essay on Bastian, Dilthey’s optimism appears in these drafts in his belief that, “the enormous collection of historical facts and their scientific treatment” now makes possible a research program according to a “rigorously inductive method,” which should “lead us toward a true view of the world” (XVIII.16).

In preparatory drafts for the 1875 essay, Dilthey again emphasizes anthropology’s foundational role. It is the great achievement of his century to have historicized cultural life. In this tendency, Dilthey sees the further progress of the human sciences as resting on “the basic relations that anthropology provides,” as the discipline that seeks “to convey the whole, highest spiritual life as a historical product on the basis of physiological and psychological laws,” which condition the relations of individuals to one another and to nature (GS XVIII.217-8). But the work of anthropology here does not consist so much in reflection on lived experience, in the “philosophical” sense of anthropology familiar from his later writings, as on the kind of work

¹⁸ Cf. *Introduction*, GS I.40-1; SW I.91-2.

underway in ethnology. The texts around the 1875 essay convey a scientific ethos prominently advocated by the likes of Bastian: an anti-systematic intent, and an ideal of human-scientific work as cooperative, piecemeal, and exact. Addressing himself to practicing historians rather than to metaphysicians of history, Dilthey declares the purpose of his essay as being, “to lay before scientific researchers and the public a somewhat divergent method of handling intellectual phenomena.” It is a method he recognizes as being related to those of Comte, Mill, Buckle, or the *Völkerpsychologen* in its rejection of idealist philosophies of history, and yet importantly different inasmuch as he finds these authors to be still too wedded to systematic aspirations. Dilthey freely admits that, in contrast to these authors, he has “no solution to offer but only a more precise determination of the task” (XVIII.38-9). Those who stand to benefit from his philosophy of science are empirical researchers, “who will find in the results I present here a completion of their own work” (XVIII.40). Philosophy’s place appears to be strictly ancillary to the special sciences.

In a draft introduction from 1874, Dilthey gives further indication of what “exact research with philosophical intent” might involve. Besides explicating core concepts in the human-scientific representation of the historical world and establishing clear standards for evaluating evidence, Dilthey also advocates for the use, wherever possible, of statistical techniques (GS XVIII.42). As would later become fashionable in the quantitative movement in twentieth-century social history, he envisages a “statistics of books” (*Statistik der Bücher*) as a tool of historical research. Applying statistical methods to library collections should make it possible, for example, “to determine in a quantitative way the extent and strength of [scientific] tendencies, the occupation with individual branches [of science], and their local distribution.” With quantitative analyses of books and manuscripts, Dilthey hopes, precise maps of social

ecologies of ideas could do for the history of science what Alexander von Humboldt's climatological maps did for physical geography (V.40-1; XVIII.48-9).¹⁹ In this project, the goal is not so much an internalist interpretation of thoughts recorded in written remains, still less an understanding of their authors, as an objectification of those remains themselves as *materialia* constituting a part of natural history.

Still more revelatory of Dilthey's worldview at this point in his career is a set of fragments from the early 1870s titled "Meine Metaphysik."²⁰ In these Dilthey makes explicit the ontological commitments concerning the relation of individuals and historical phenomena underpinning his early theory of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. The negative part of Dilthey's youthful metaphysics consists in a refutation of the Spinozan/Hegelian proposition, that "all determination is negation" (*omnis determinatio est negatio*). Against this, Dilthey proposes a view of reality as "an entirely positive totality [*ganz positiver Inbegriff*] of qualities." Constituting the world is a determinate mosaic of qualities, one that is not ceaselessly giving rise to contradictions as its qualities are successively grasped in thought. At the same time, the sources of this totality in which its essence consists, namely individuals, lie beyond the bounds of knowledge. Thought, Dilthey maintains, is "not in a position to resolve the essence of positivity [*des Positiven*]." Like elements in a chemical compound, the individuals constituting the world persist through change, and thus "there is no conceptual decomposition [*Zersetzung*] of the world." What is within the bounds of thinking is only the "outwardly ascertainable" character of the world, or the invariant relations among its qualities. From this standpoint, Dilthey draws several consequences. Among these is the thesis that, "the total expression of the positivity of the

¹⁹ The ideas of statistical analyses of library collections and of quantifying cultural transmission too survive in *Introduction*; GS I.115; SW I.164.

²⁰ Misch (GS V.xcvii) dates these to ca. 1870; Johach and Rodi (GS XVIII) to 1874.

world” is contained in “the basic laws and factors of earthly life,” which determine its manner of development. The goal of objective knowledge of the human world thus encompasses relational facts among outwardly expressed qualities, while a critical perspective reminds us that these issue ultimately from an unknowable ground in individuals (GS XVIII.198-9). Individuals, whether the elements of nature or of culture, that underlie the world-whole are its irreducible “mystery” (*Geheimnis*). For Dilthey, it is also the case that the meaning and value of the world rests in the perspectives of experiencers. Yet, because the individuals remain mysterious, scientific inquiry must limit itself to the intersubjectively accessible relations among phenomena. Nor can these relations be reduced to the representations of minds, for physical conditions operate as “ligaments” in cultural systems and condition their development. With a telling image, Dilthey writes: “If we could compare the ensemble of all our natural conditions with those of another planet, we would discover the anticipations in which our intellect lives” (XVIII.197-8).

In sum, Dilthey’s early drafts and fragments outline a view of humanistic inquiry and its relation to natural science that, in crucial respects, resembles that of the empirical anthropologists’ more than it does that of the historical school. In particular, Dilthey challenges the nature/culture dichotomy upon which Rankean or Droysenian historicism rests. For Dilthey, how human nature gets expressed is always conditioned by material circumstances, and thus the meaning even of humanity’s greatest textual monuments cannot be reduced to ideas in great minds or to the spirit of a cultural epoch. In the study of human nature, consequently, it will not suffice to restrict attention to the achievements of *Kulturvölker*. Human scientists stand to learn much from those whom Droysen would leave out of history. Like Waitz or Bastian, the early Dilthey denies the epistemological significance of distinguishing human communities “living in the state of nature” from those that have allegedly emancipated themselves from dependence on

nature. For Dilthey, the natural and the cultural are intimately bound up, and the methods and aims of their respective sciences have more in common than Droysen would grant. This lesson persists into the 1880s, despite Dilthey's growing reservations about Bastian's dreams of a quantitative science of cultural meanings. As he states the aim of *Introduction*:

While the present work will attempt to ground the relative independence of the human sciences, it must also consider the other perspective, which places them within the framework of all the sciences, and thus it must develop the system of dependencies which can show how the human sciences are conditioned by our knowledge of nature." (GS I.17; SW I.68-9).

This framing of the project reveals Dilthey's basic agreement with the anthropologists' perspective. Whatever the peculiarities of the socio-historical world, it must nevertheless be seen as belonging to a single empirical domain, and thus the mental facts of concern to the humanists as comprising "the uppermost limit of natural facts, and the latter the underlying conditions of human life." It is a lesson Dilthey retains as he sets about renovating the historicist tradition in which he was trained.

5. Conclusion

In *Introduction*, Dilthey recognizes a central function for comparative anthropology in the system of the human sciences. Only with the help of anthropology, ethnology, and the special disciplines that draw on their results, he writes, "can a solution to the problem of the connection among the successive states of society gradually be approached" (GS I.111; SW I.160). At the same time, *Introduction*, the subsequent drafts for its continuation, and later writings mark a shift in Dilthey's thought away from the outlook of the ethnologists and back toward that of the

historical school. The orientation familiar from Dilthey's last two decades stands in contrast to his early account of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. In the 1860s-70s, Dilthey sees ethnographic and archaeological research into social practices and material remains as vital to the foundational project, rooted in the thought that what can be rigorously subjected to inductive methods are only the relational forms of the socio-historical world. Individual actors and their textual records are certainly worthy subjects of biography and philological studies—the sort of endeavor to which Dilthey himself devoted much energy. Yet, individuality is not scientifically tractable, and the specific ways in which it contributes to historical development remains opaque. By 1900, however, he readily affirms that “mute works” cannot be understood except by the light thrown on them by textual sources, and consequently without reference to the meanings ascribed to them by individuals in their socio-historical contexts (“Rise of Hermeneutics,” GS V.319; SW IV.237).

I have argued that attention to Dilthey's early period reveals the influence of a specific counter-current in German science as a key source of the epistemological tensions that later occupied him. As he first set upon the task of a critique of historical reason, he was drawn to two apparently irreconcilable directions: a textual-hermeneutical one, epitomized in his biography of Schleiermacher, that places great historical actors at the center, and an empiricist one, conveyed in his reviews, drafts, and essays, that focuses on the external forms of social life. Although he came eventually to embrace anew the historicist tradition of his teachers, the lessons he had learned from its critics continued to inform his new account of historical science. This expanded context for interpreting Dilthey thus leaves us with fresh questions concerning his conception of the role of empirical anthropology for understanding lived experience, of the respective places of

material and textual remains as sources for historical inquiry, and ultimately of Dilthey's struggles to defend objectivity in history.

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