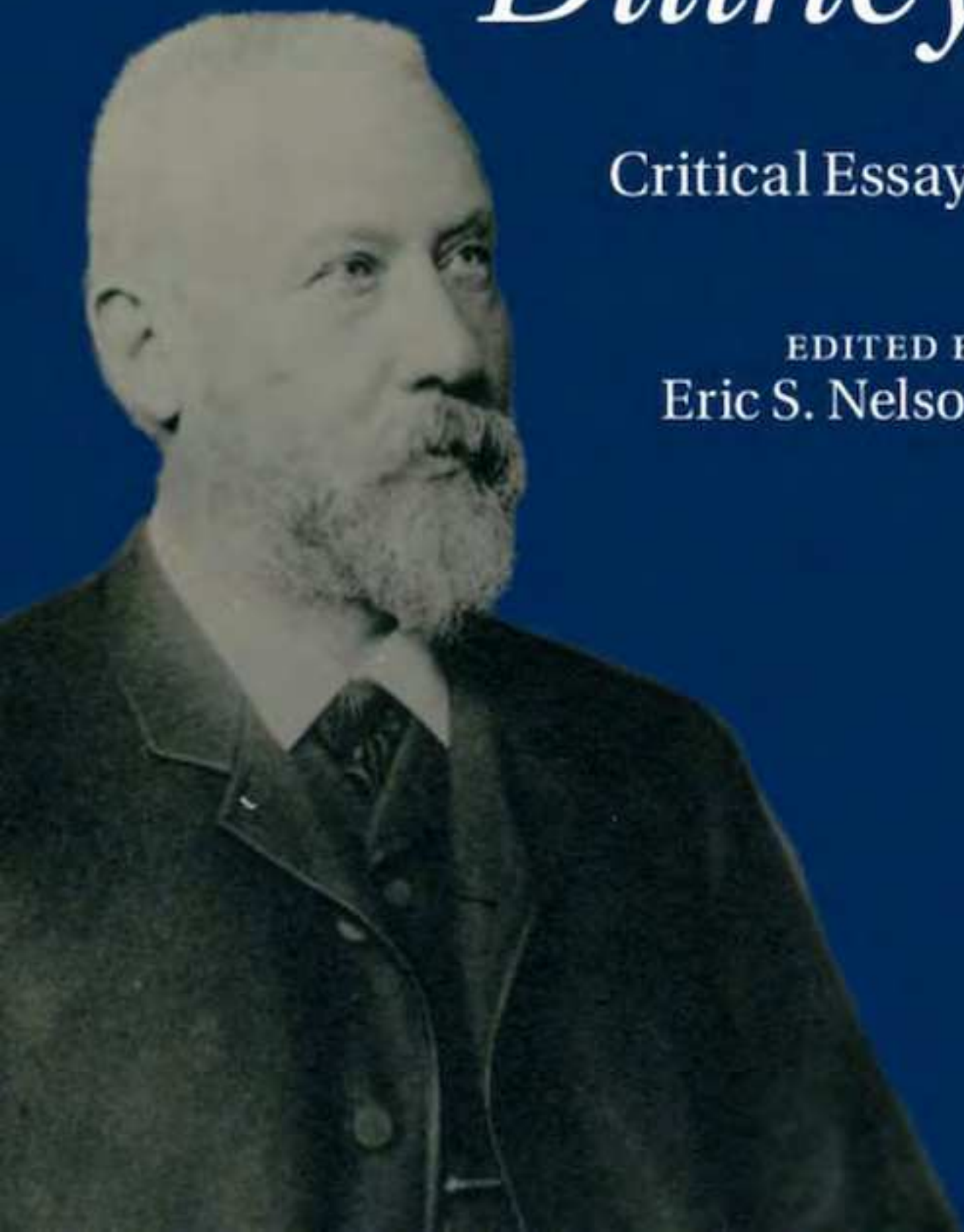


Interpreting Dilthey

Critical Essays

EDITED BY
Eric S. Nelson



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ERIC S. NELSON

Hong Kong University of Science and Technology



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To Rudolf A. Makkreel

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Introduction: Wilhelm Dilthey in Context

Eric S. Nelson

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).¹

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.² 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

¹ 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).

² 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.³ 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

³ 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.

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.⁴ 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.⁵

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

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

⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹

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.”¹⁰ 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

⁶ 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).

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

⁸ 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).

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

¹⁰ Gadamer (1995, 9). Christoffer 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.¹¹

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.¹²

¹¹ 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).

¹² 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.¹³ 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

¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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

¹⁴ 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*.¹⁵

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

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

that dominated European philosophy in the mid-nineteenth century. Dilthey advocated his own particular, more expansive and tolerant variety of empirical, positivist, and “scientistic” philosophy in confrontation with the narrowing and reification of what legitimately counted as experience and scientific inquiry, while rejecting any perspective “transcending of experience” (Horkheimer 1939, 431).

Dilthey is frequently enlisted on behalf of the idea that the humanities and natural sciences have two distinct cultures. He is said to have helped solidify the divide between these two cultures or styles of thinking. This is achieved by distinguishing between understanding (*verstehen*) and explanation (*erklären*) as the leading sensibilities of the subjectively and intersubjectively oriented human sciences and the objectively oriented natural sciences. Dilthey is a problematic source for arguments for dualism given his rejection of “two world” theories. Dilthey argued for the structural differentiation of wholes given in experience rather than metaphysically or ontologically based dualities between nature and spirit. Dilthey’s philosophical practice, which integrated scientific research and philosophical reflection, in fact challenged the gulf between artistic-humanistic-interpretive and scientific-naturalistic-explanatory modes of thought. The oft-overlooked point is that this is an epistemological-methodologically based distinction immanently called for by the objects of study themselves.

It is erroneous to identify Dilthey’s philosophy of the sciences with the human and historical sciences alone. All sciences as practical pursuits presuppose a natural and social-historical world. They differ in how they bring these dimensions of the structural nexus of human life – self, others, social structures, external objects, natural forces – into consideration. As an inheritor of the Enlightenment’s opposition to metaphysics and speculative philosophy, in ways that resonate with and that influenced Rudolf Carnap and the early Vienna Circle, Dilthey rejected an unconditional difference in substance or essence between mind and matter, spirit and nature, reason and the world (Nelson 2018a). In contrast with both the philosophical tradition and many contemporaries, Dilthey stressed the need to cultivate both the interpretive-experiential and explanatory-experimental aspects of scientific inquiry. The relation between hermeneutical interpretation and naturalistic explanation is one of degrees on an experiential continuum rather than an abstract opposition. The fluidity between explanatory and interpretative strategies, which equally emerge from lived-experience and the structural nexus of life, was fixed and fragmented into irreducible opposites in twentieth-century disputes over hermeneutics and positivism in the sciences.

5 Biological and Interpersonal Life

Dilthey's relation with "life-philosophy" is ambiguous. Some so-called life-philosophers promoted an irrational and noninterpretive direct intuition of the immediacy of life that opposes Dilthey's account of interpretive mediation. Horkheimer accordingly notes that "it is not when we examine ourselves, it is not by introspection nor, as Dilthey once said, by brooding, that we arrive at what we are, but by an analysis of historical reality" (Horkheimer 1939, 433).

"Vulgar" or "popular" life-philosophers such as Oswald Spengler, as noted by Otto Neurath (who is otherwise critical of Dilthey), uncritically adopted phrases from Dilthey, misusing them for their own purposes (Neurath 1973, 202–204). Unlike much of what is classified under life-philosophy, a questionable and vague historical category that erases the differences between the thinkers it purportedly designates, Dilthey repeatedly explicitly rejected (1) the speculative philosophy of nature and organicist vitalistic *Naturphilosophie*, (2) the employment of spiritual and vital principles in biology and the human sciences, and (3) the thesis that immediate feeling and intuition should have priority over interpretation and conceptualization.

In contrast with the German irrationalism that flourished in the first half of the twentieth century in vulgar life-philosophy and biological racial thinking, Dilthey was dedicated throughout his lifetime to the historically emergent yet ethically unconditional value of the individual person.¹⁶ Dilthey's personalism could interpret individual life as ethical and meaningful while allowing for its natural and social constitution and scientific analysis. It was centered in historical life, in which "hunger, love, and war are the most powerful forces" (Dilthey GS 5: 209) and not problematic supernatural or metaphysical claims about persons that cannot be justified through experience, Dilthey likewise retained the commitment to the project of achieving cognitively valid insight and knowledge through the integration of experience, personal reflection, and scientific inquiry. He insisted that reflection and inquiry, however, remain one-sided and abstract without understanding the diversity and richness of the human world, the depths of the life of the individual who lives and acts in this world, and the sciences that study it. This is the immanent movement

¹⁶ Dilthey's oft-cited statement from the Schleiermacher biography that the "individual is ineffable" (GS 13 / 1–2: 1; SW 4: 249) indicates the complexity of this relational whole rather than an unknowable essence or substance.

from facticity to ideality in which practical and philosophical wisdom is to be found.

The practically and communicatively mediated nexus of life (*Lebenszusammenhang*), as a dynamic “structural whole” (*Strukturzusammenhang*), of finite individuated organisms is the inescapable context for science and philosophy. This is the case even as individuals immanently strive to transcend their conditional context for the sake of ideal truth, beauty, and the good that have unconditional universal significance and validity, and which in turn can be brought back to their context in the functional reality of the practical life-nexus. As finite natural-cultural beings in a hermeneutical situation, situationally enacting self-reflexive awareness (*Innewerden*) and critical self-reflection (*Selbst-Besinnung*) and exposed to multiplicity and aporia, we cannot force or divine a conclusion to the oscillation between the practical and the theoretical, the factual and the ideal, the particular and the universal, nor the individual and the whole.¹⁷

These dynamic life-contexts have already been and will continue to be structured and mediated by language, conceptualization, and theory. Thus, appeals to unmediated emotion, intuition, and irrational vitality are as incomplete, socially mediated, and open to interpretation as abstract conceptualistic rationalism (compare Horkheimer 1939, 435). The philosophical alternative articulated by Dilthey encompasses the epistemic modesty and historical humility associated with: (1) a deflationary, embodied, and minimalistic transcendental philosophy – that Karl-Otto Apel described as Dilthey’s project of “transforming Kant’s transcendental philosophy of consciousness into a quasi-transcendental philosophy of life” – or, alternatively, (2) a critical, hermeneutical, socially historically mediated, and – hence – higher or expansive *empiria* (“unbefangene Empirie”) without the (doctrinal) empiricism (“Empirie, nicht Empirismus”) that reductively limits and distorts what counts as experience and its expression.¹⁸ Dilthey’s expansive experientialism is operative in his psychological writings. Whereas Wilhelm Windelband and the Neo-Kantian philosophers distinguished psychology, conceived as a natural science, from the “cultural sciences” (*Kulturwissenschaften*), Dilthey controversially located psychology in the realm of the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*). Dilthey’s interpretive psychology was the

¹⁷ Compare my discussions in Nelson (2008; 2010; 2011a).

¹⁸ Apel (1984, 4, 248); Dilthey GS 1: 81 and GS 19: 17. For further discussion of Dilthey’s relation to empiricism and its German history, see Damböck (2012; 2017); Nelson (2007; Nelson 2018a).

most contested part of his philosophy during his lifetime. These works not only separated him from Neo-Kantianism, they made him the target of Hermann Ebbinghaus and the newly emerging discourse of explanatory psychology. Dilthey's descriptive and analytic psychology had, on the one hand, clear affinities with the British empiricist psychological tradition of Berkeley, Hume, and John Stuart Mill, while, on the other hand, rejecting its atomism and associationism through the description and analysis of experiences as relational structural wholes (prefiguring Gestalt-psychology and phenomenological psychology) and the individual as a developmental unity (compare Nelson 2010). In this psychology of "concrete life," the individual's sense of continuity and identity is not given; it is acquired in the formation of an "acquired psychic nexus" (*erworbener seelischer Zusammenhang*). Dilthey's structuralism, evident in his analyses of the individual sciences and their objects, is perhaps the most underemphasized dimension of his methodology in his English-speaking reception.

6 Dilthey's Aesthetics

Dilthey was best known to wider audiences for his popular aesthetic works such as *Lived Experience and Poetry*. It is this Dilthey who, according to Georg Lukács, opened up new ground for aesthetics (including his own early work) with his large-scale interdisciplinary syntheses that subsequently needed to be overcome by his generation for the sake of a more radical, objectively rooted, Marxist conception of aesthetics.¹⁹ Dilthey's aesthetics is portrayed by Lukács as a continuation of Romanticism and a form of bourgeois aestheticism that – due to the emphasis on feeling, imagination, and the free responsiveness of the subject – is incompatible with the realism and naturalism of the second half of the nineteenth century and his own realist aesthetics.

However, Dilthey's aesthetic works present a more complicated picture. As Makkreel has analyzed, aesthetics is for Dilthey a model human science and involves critical in addition to descriptive tasks (Makkreel 1992: 15, 78). In a number of his aesthetic writings, particularly "The Three Epochs of Modern Aesthetics and Its Present Task" (1892), Dilthey was clearly a more sympathetic and complex aesthetic theorist who criticized the

¹⁹ On Dilthey's importance and limitations for Lukács' early thought, see Lukács (1978, 13). This suspicion of "bourgeois aestheticism" and individualism occurs in others such as Theodor W. Adorno's remarks on Dilthey's *Lived Experience and Poetry* in his 1957 lectures on aesthetics (Adorno 2017, 25–26).

limitations while articulating the significance and possibilities of literary realism and naturalism against their Neo-Romantic critics and the emergence of symbolist spiritualism and its visionary enthusiasm. The power of realism for Dilthey lies in how it critically reveals the discrepancy between outer appearance and internal reality, even as its weakness is its inability to reflectively generalize and interpretively focus on what is essential to evoking and heightening the “feeling of life” (*Lebensgefühl*). Rather than rejecting naturalism and defending Romantic aesthetics, naturalism is understood as achieving its truth when it not only copies and reproduces but elucidates, intensifies, and transforms the life that it portrays. The naturalism of social novels – such as those of Dickens, Balzac, and Zola – is the emergence of a new style and sensibility appropriate for the modern technological conditions of life that has not yet achieved a “new inner form” for the work of art in relation to the subjectivity of the artist and audience. Dilthey consequently reinterprets both romanticism and realism as revealing two sides of the tensions of reality and feeling, resistance and will, and the objectivities of social life in the context of individual lived-experience (*Erlebnis*). In Dilthey’s life-philosophical and hermeneutical analysis, realism and naturalism prove to be incomplete steps that are more aesthetically promising for the “present task of aesthetics” than what Dilthey diagnosed in late romantic tendencies: the abandonment of the tensions between reality and feeling in a literature that one-sidedly and unreflectively embraces vitality, intuition, and irrational feeling. Dilthey’s aesthetic writings echo his wider “hermeneutical empiricist” strategy of critiquing and contextualizing idealist epistemology by situating knowledge in relation to the life-nexus: the social-historical, psychological, and natural conditions of life.

7 Description of the Contributions

The contributions to this volume, written by a group of internationally recognized scholars, engage how Dilthey’s innovative philosophical strategies and arguments are to be understood in relation to their historical situation and how they remain relevant to current philosophical issues concerning art and literature, the biographical and autobiographical self, knowledge, language, and the sciences, psychology and the embodied mind, and culture, history, and society. The contributions of this volume enact a critical interpretation of key facets of the development, content, and historical and philosophical implications of Dilthey’s thought, providing both an introduction and critical analysis.

In Chapter 1, Rudolf A. Makkreel examines the Kantian point of departure and the interpretive orienting significance of purposiveness in Dilthey's works, tracing how Dilthey hermeneutically transformed the Kantian notion of immanent purposiveness. Dilthey critically differentiated his approach from traditional metaphysics and objective idealism, in particular Hegel's systematizing developmental use of teleology, rejecting robust forms of teleological explanation that attribute intrinsic purposes to nature or that speculatively posit final purposes for human existence and history. Dilthey articulates in contrast a multiperspectival contextualizing sense of human history in which forms of purposiveness and counterpurposiveness operate within historical forms of life and social organizations.

In Chapter 2, Jos de Mul reconsiders the neglected role of biology in Dilthey's philosophy of the human sciences, focusing on how Dilthey's conception of life as an "immanent purposiveness of organic life" is a transformation of Kant's subjectivist approach to purposiveness. This interpretation of the mediating role of the biological perspective leads de Mul to consider the extent to which Dilthey prefigures contemporary "naturalized" phenomenological accounts of cognition as *embodied*, *embedded*, *enacted*, and *extended*, and offers lessons for how to interpret the nexus of social-historical reality in relation to and beyond biological life.

While the first two chapters elucidate the key notion of purposiveness in Dilthey, the next set of chapters turn to his hermeneutics and the philosophy of history. Michael N. Forster tracks in Chapter 3 the development of Dilthey's concern with hermeneutics as the practice and theory of interpretation. Forster clarifies how this concern is closely linked in his early works with his interests in issues of biographical and autobiographical understanding, evident in his *Life of Schleiermacher*, and the foundations and methodology of the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) in *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, and follows their import into his later hermeneutics of historical life as well as contemporary hermeneutics.

In Chapter 4, Charles Bambach explores the question of hermeneutics in the context of Dilthey's project of a "Critique of Historical Reason," analyzing this critique as both part of the "hermeneutical turn" in modern Western philosophy and as a residue of Cartesian-Kantian metaphysical foundationalism. While the former indicates how the historical-hermeneutic interpretation of life is inexorably marked by contingency, finitude, and plurality, the latter aims at securing a stable epistemological foundation for all sciences. Dilthey appears to either paradoxically combine both tendencies or to suggest an alternative in epistemologically grounding the human sciences in a historically situated self-reflexive awareness.

Frederick C. Beiser turns our attention to Dilthey's historicism in Chapter 5. Dilthey presented his project of a critique of historical reason as an extension of the historical spirit into philosophy and as a defense of the insights of the historical school – associated with his teachers Ranke, Mommsen, Boeckh, and Trendelenburg – that broke with its absorption in particularity and lack of abstraction and theory. Beiser depicts how Dilthey's historical and systematic works intend to radically historicize philosophy and rationality.

In Chapter 6, Robert C. Scharff revisits the question of the natural and human sciences and the problem of the unity of the sciences, exploring Dilthey's contextualized and methodologically pluralistic alternative to the idea that scientific theory and practice requires one fundamental method in order to count as scientific. Dilthey prefigures postpositivist philosophy of science, which in a number of significant ways has yet to sufficiently take the hermeneutical turn indicated in Dilthey.

Shaun Gallagher takes up Dilthey's distinctive underappreciated conception of empathy in Chapter 7. He notes that Dilthey did not use the more typical German expression *Einfühlung* but “*mitfühlen*,” which literally means “feeling with” and which has significant hermeneutical implications in his interpretation of the method and practice of the human sciences. Relying on the developmental psychology of his time, Dilthey differentiated forms of elementary and full empathic understanding and described the social mediation of the mind. Gallagher considers how Dilthey's insights can contribute to contemporary discussions of empathy.

In Chapter 8, Benjamin Crowe turns to an investigation of Dilthey's moral vision and ethical theory, which Dilthey himself thought played a pivotal role in his philosophical thought. Dilthey articulated an ethical discourse that analyzed the social-historical mediation and the priority of creativity and individuality in self-cultivation and self-formation (*Bildung*). Dilthey's ethics addresses areas of practical philosophy such as moral development and psychology, moral education and self-cultivation, forms of practical logic and reasoning, as well as value theory.

In Chapter 9, Nicolas de Warren considers Dilthey's philosophy of worldviews and his conception of their struggle, beginning with an analysis of Dilthey's “dream” that was presented in a lecture on the historical influences on his work given on his seventieth birthday. The author follows the tension between Dilthey's call for a “historical worldview” (*geschichtliche Weltanschauung*) and the problem of an anarchy of opinions and perspectives. This tension informed Dilthey's formulation of a philosophy of worldviews, encompassing their types and conflicts, that would allow Dilthey to appreciate the historicity of thought while not

abandoning rationality's universalizing aspirations. The "philosophy of philosophy" is a late form of Dilthey's project of a critique of historical reason.

In Chapter 10, Kristin Gjesdal considers Dilthey as a philosopher of contemporary culture, examining his reception of new artistic movements represented by authors such as Dickens, Balzac, Zola, and Ibsen. Dilthey critically embraced the new realist novel and articulated the new poetics that they demanded. Gjesdal explores the role of realism in Dilthey's poetics. She argues that in the late 1880s, his aesthetics involves: (1) an effort to shed light on the new literary forms of realism and naturalism, (2) a systematic attempt at grounding aesthetics in a detranscendentalized psychology, and (3) a claim that work-oriented and systematic approaches are both needed in aesthetics.

Paul Guyer contrasts in Chapter 11 the anti-Hegelian tendencies in the aesthetics of Dilthey and George Santayana, evaluating their respective endeavors to free aesthetic experience and practice from the demands of metaphysics and from a teleological conception of the development of art while retaining a sense of aesthetic holism.

Lee Braver considers in Chapter 12 the hermeneutical dimension of the work of Wittgenstein, analyzing the affinities and differences between Dilthey and the later Wittgenstein on issues of understanding, interpretation, and meaning-holism. They suggest two ways of articulating the immanent holistic context of the life-nexus and form of life through which understanding occurs and which it cannot transcend to arrive at unconditional or external foundations.

In the concluding chapter, Chapter 13, Jean Grondin returns to the question of hermeneutics in Dilthey in light of its reception in the philosophical hermeneutics of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur, tracing how Dilthey's work marks a crucial point in the transmission of the conception of hermeneutics to subsequent philosophers while not systematically prioritizing the concept or even using it for large stretches of his career. Grondin describes how Dilthey broadened and extended hermeneutics from an auxiliary discipline to a way of doing philosophy, analyzing its significance for the development of the hermeneutical thinking of Heidegger and Gadamer who both adopted from and polemicized against Dilthey's interpretation of interpretation and his hermeneutical strategies.

The chapters of this collection offer a variety of critical perspectives on Dilthey's philosophy in its historical context and in view of its continuing relevance. The hope is that they will encourage further investigations and reconsiderations of the structures and implications of Dilthey's philosophy.