

Self-Reflection, Interpretation, and Historical Life in Dilthey

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1. Introduction

Heinrich Rickert contended in his *Philosophy of Life*, which is a critique of what he considered »modish« life-philosophy (*Lebensphilosophie*), that «historical philosophy does not exist» and that the historical is merely the contingent raw material for philosophy to be excluded in its systematization.¹ Rickert dismissed the historical as accidental, heterogeneous, and particular, in contrast with the necessity, unity, and universality of value and validity. From this perspective, he accused Dilthey of being a »life-philosopher« who turned a lack of principles into the ultimate principle and undermined rationality by denying that there is intelligibility and meaning independent of the natural and historical world.²

Diverging from the dominant Neo-Kantianism and Positivism of his era, Wilhelm Dilthey's works engaged, articulated, and opened up the historical for reflection, as his writings indicate an endeavor to enact historical research with a philosophical intent while interpreting philosophy in relation to its historical referential context.³ Philosophy is inevitably historical for Dilthey in being informed by and responding to its times. It is not historical in being lost in the

¹ Heinrich Rickert: *Die Philosophie des Lebens*. Tübingen 1920, 49-50.

² Rickert, 1920, 46-49.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all references to Dilthey's works are to the pagination of the *Gesammelte Schriften* (cited as GS) and the translations of the *Selected Works* (SW). – GS V, 35; GS XVIII, 43-44.

plural, the particular, and the contingent, as Rickert worried, but by encountering the present and engaging it in experience and reflection.

Frithjof Rodi has described Dilthey's strategy as a »synergetic analysis,« which articulates overlapping tendencies in their plurality and tension rather than reducing them to an abstract identity.⁴ Dilthey did not offer a conventional or anti-philosophical »history of ideas« that only categorizes positions and views, since his strategy was to reopen thought to its lived experiential and reflective as well as its worldly and social-historical horizons. This paper focuses on two questions that can be asked of Dilthey's historical strategy: What does history signify in the context of Dilthey's critique and transformation of previous »philosophy of history« and why is historicity crucial to what he called the task of self-reflection (*Selbstbesinnung*)?

It is well-known that Dilthey described his project as a »critique of historical reason«, and the inaccurate interpretation of Dilthey as an advocate of irrationalism or mere life-philosophy has been corrected multiple times. In this paper, I contend that Dilthey developed an alternative account of rationality by prioritizing self-reflection in relation to its experiential life-contexts and consequently of articulating a critical model of a historical, immanent, and this-worldly rationality. This model does not suppress the heterogeneous and contingent character of human existence. Nor does it exclude the affective and the bodily dimensions of human life, without which understanding cannot occur, although individual existence and social life are not only formed on the basis of affective and bodily life and experience. It is reflection, when it recognizes the non-conceptual and non-cognitive, which allows them to be heard and articulated; that is, if they are heard and addressed at all.

Dilthey describes how elemental experiences are not self-transparent intuitions insofar as they already involve – through self-reflexivity – understanding, interpretation, and expression as well as self-reflection. These processes are not merely »cognitive« or »intellectual« such that they could be denounced or excluded from philosophy and the human sciences in order to celebrate pure life, intuition, or experience as such. Nor can self-reflection be seen as the core of the self, as interiority, as it is simultaneously a reflection tied up with the

⁴ Frithjof Rodi: *Erkenntnis des Erkannten*. Frankfurt a.M. 1990, 24-30.

world and the claims of reality on the self.⁵ Human life is autobiographical and hence self-reflective in relation to others, its world, and itself. The seemingly natural and ontological categories of life and intuition are themselves shaped in and by human practices, formations, and contexts, and depend on history, language, and society through human self-expression, stylization, and conceptualization.

The human sciences presuppose a response to the question of self and society, and are implicated in the very formations of identity that they study. The human sciences are connected from the beginning – whether acknowledged or not – to the reality of and possibilities for self-knowledge. Since the self is a formative and acquired nexus for Dilthey, such knowledge is experiential and reflective yet cannot avoid the work of understanding and interpretation. It has been impacted by others and accordingly cannot only be an issue of a self that is transparent to itself through the light of intuition or reason. Instead, self-reflection leads to interpretive and empirical inquiry into the individual and social-historical life nexus (*Lebenszusammenhang*) in which I participate and of which I am to some extent a conscious co-agent.⁶ In advocating a self-reflection that is not merely private or subjective and the auto-biography that more or less directly expresses the self-reflection of a life⁷, Dilthey's hermeneutics radically diverges – as Gadamer himself notes – from one that contends that the »self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life.«⁸

Like Gadamer, Theodor Adorno criticizes Dilthey for overemphasizing individuals and their differences.⁹ Dilthey recognized and articulated the impersonal forces and dimensions of social-historical life such as custom, habit, and tradition as well as the material and economic reproduction of society. One example of this is that, while rejecting what he considered his overly abstract and radical approach to society, Dilthey could praise the structural analysis of

⁵ GS VIII, 39.

⁶ GS I, 37 / SW I, 89; and GS I, 3 / SW I, 56.

⁷ GS VII, 198 / SW III, 219.

⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Truth and Method*. London 2004, 278.

⁹ Theodor W. Adorno: *Hegel: Three Studies*. Tr. S. W. Nichol森. Cambridge 1993, 60.

capitalism in Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*.¹⁰ By employing objectivating third-person perspectives, the individual can always be analyzed and explained as a continuation of the past, as embodying natural and biological tendencies, or as a functional component and tool of the social tendencies and historical traditions to which it belongs. Dilthey did not exclude these strategies from the human sciences even as he disputed the claim asserting their exclusivity or absoluteness in interpreting social-historical life. Nor did Dilthey abandon examining the impersonal structural and ontological dimensions of social-historical life in his own research, which he designated the external organization of society. Nonetheless, the individual can be considered in relation to and from out of its own first-person perspective, which is already dialogical and other-related through the interconnection of »I« and »you«, as a participating co-agent in social life. This first-person perspective of understanding is in fact presupposed by »all further operations of the human sciences«. ¹¹ As a human science, history assumes understanding between persons, i.e., between self and other, insofar as not only its objects but its contents, its activity, and its knowledge falls and operates within social life.

The human sciences originate for Dilthey in the self-reflection of ordinary social life and in reflection on the contexts and conditions of that life.¹² Human scientific inquiry is necessarily self-reflexive, insofar as one studies oneself, and empirical to the degree that the self does not transparently know itself and its social relations through consciousness alone. The human sciences presuppose the potential truth and validity of the first person perspective of self-reflexive agents while simultaneously needing to go beyond the ordinary self-understandings of individuals in examining the processes and structures to which every social agent is to some degree or another subjected and as a result shaped as a subject of a particular life-nexus. As a crossing of multiple social tendencies, the individual expresses that life-nexus while transforming it by living and enacting it in its own manner. Socialization and individuation are bound together, and this double need indicates why Dilthey should be read as justifying both a hermeneutics of the self-interpretations of persons in the

¹⁰ GS XVII, 186-187.

¹¹ GS V, 334 / SW IV, 253.

¹² GS I, 38 / SW I, 89.

context of social-historical life as well as structural-functional analysis and causal explanations of that life. The human sciences require the multiplication of perspectives of interpretation and explanation while, nevertheless, prioritizing experience, understanding, and interpretation in socially and historically informed self-reflection.

Knowing is not an isolated private and subjective condition of the individual's interiority or intuition for Dilthey, it is worldly and interpersonal from the start. Knowledge of human affairs is constituted and reshaped by the lived experiences and practical interests of the individuals and groups of social life. History, as experienced and as inquiry, is accordingly neither accidental nor a hindrance to knowledge, as it is its very medium. Likewise, experiences and practices are not fallen manifestations of ideas, norms, and values that have a validity and intelligibility of their own but are the context and content of their enactment and occurrence. Historical research and the human sciences cannot then exclude the facticity of life for the sake of ideal validity without missing their very orienting question and concern – the interpretive and empirical encounter with the concrete particularity and multiplicity of human existence in oneself and others.

2. Dilthey between Hegel and Heidegger?

The »philosophy of history« has fallen into disrepute to the extent that it has been identified with the ability to know, predict, and produce history (what Karl Popper inaccurately calls »historicism«) or the positing and construction of a comprehensive totality that would justify the course of history, including its brutality, cruelty, and terror, in the name of a greater good or, as in Hegel, for the sake of the present.¹³ However, even according to Hegel, who notoriously seems to lack sympathy for the particular, and for whom history *is* theodicy;¹⁴

¹³ G. W. F. Hegel: *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*. Band I. Hamburg 1955, 79 / *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*. Tr. Leo Rauch. Indianapolis 1988, 24.

¹⁴ Compare Hegel, *ibid.*, 48 / 18; Iain Macdonald: *What is Conceptual History*, in: Katerina Deligiorgi (Ed.): *Hegel: New Directions*. Chesham 2006, 215-218; and Joseph McCarney: *Hegel on History*. London 2000, 195-207.

»Yet what experience and history teach us is this, that nations and governments have never learned anything from history, nor acted in accordance with the lessons to be derived from it. Each era has such particular circumstances, such individual situations, that decisions can only be made from within that era itself.«¹⁵

Hegel maintained both the historical conditionality and particularity of an era as well as history having a more vital sense and significance such that the present is where the absolute occurs. In a passage, which might at first glance evoke Hegel's statement, Dilthey notes the basic facticity of history; »But that is precisely the lesson of history: In its deepest concerns, the human race really has no inkling of the way the barriers of historical conditions enclose its life.«¹⁶

Whereas for Hegel the conditional and unconditional always stand in a complex relationship of mediation, Hegel's certainty, faith, and underlying principle of identity concerning the historical is lacking in Dilthey. Dilthey did not identify an absolute in history, and refused the »magical formula« of identity that would resolve the tension of being and thinking.¹⁷ He nonetheless argued that the present is not the limit of historical interpretation and for the reality of conceptual and scientific progress.¹⁸ Conceptualization and idealization necessarily move away from the facticity of immanent historical life through generalization and universalization while not escaping or transcending its own historical life-nexus, including relations of power.¹⁹

History is not simply the scientific study of a set of objectively given facts or objects of research. Historical research is only practicable because human life is already fundamentally historical.²⁰ This difference, which for Dilthey compels the relation between history as science and history as facticity, would be taken up by Heidegger as the distinction between historiography or the science of history (*Historie*) and history as enactment, occurrence, and event

¹⁵ Hegel, *ibid.*, 19 / 8.

¹⁶ GS XIV, 613 / SW IV, 51.

¹⁷ GS VIII, 118.

¹⁸ GS VII, 345-346 / SW III, 366-367.

¹⁹ GS VII, 287 / SW III, 307.

²⁰ GS VII, 277-278 / SW III, 297.

(*Geschichte*).²¹ Whereas Heidegger alternatively sought to reformulate or reject *Historie* in the name of *Geschichte*, a movement culminating in the history of Being (*Seinsgeschichte*), Dilthey focused on illuminating the intertwinement of historical research and historical lived-experience through the moment of self-reflection and interpretation. »Ontic history« is not in danger of being submerged in the ontological history of being, nor historical research replaced by philosophical history as seems to be in the case of Heidegger.²²

In Dilthey's thinking of the historical, by contrast, the historicity of »originary history« cannot be separated from the contingent, empirical, and ontic character of self-reflection on history which is the basis of the discipline or science of history. The academic study of history is called forth by the interruptions and lack of transparency of historical self-understanding and memory. Originary history is already inherently singular-plural for Dilthey. The multiplicity of historical forces and facticities, their incommensurability and conflict, undermines any identity or unity of history, whether history is understood as *factual historicity* or the *human science of history*.²³

3. History as Facticity, Art, and Science

Early in the *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, Dilthey criticized unifying approaches to historical life by showing the relatedness of facticity, the incommensurability of perspectives and sources, and the immanent and inherent limits to experience and knowledge.²⁴ Resistance and reversal, the singular and the whole, are modes of facticity, which inform Dilthey's conception of history and the human sciences, since they indicate the finitude of historical life and the

²¹ On the development and different senses of facticity in nineteenth and twentieth-century philosophy, see the introduction to François Raffoul and E. S. Nelson (Eds.): *Rethinking Facticity*. Albany 2008, 1-21.

²² See Nelson: *History as Decision and Event* in Heidegger, in: *Arhe IV* (2007), 97-115; and T. R. Schatzki: *Living Out of the Past: Dilthey and Heidegger on Life and History*, in: *Inquiry* 46:3 (Sept. 2003), 301-323.

²³ On facticity in Dilthey, see Nelson: *Empiricism, Facticity, and the Immanence of Life* in Dilthey, in: *PLI* 18 (2007), 108-128.

²⁴ *GS I*, 10 / *SW I*, 62.

inherent limits of experience and knowledge.²⁵ And yet humans access facticity and history as factual-historical beings.

Because history is factual, the study of history is not simply the study of human consciousness and its worldly manifestations. Consciousness, as we have seen, is already worldly and historical; the self is entwined in facticity. In this case, the historical self as participant and co-agent in history is referred beyond itself to its contexts and conditions. Dilthey's »individualism« focused on the contextual individual in history rather than constructing history by means of the abstraction of the atomistic individual.²⁶ The social-historical formation of human life in its facticity cannot simply be derived from a theoretical account of human nature, insofar as the former inherently involves the perspective of an active participant confronting its own facticity rather than the attitude of a contemplative observer.²⁷ The latter approach fails to meet the goal of knowledge in the human sciences, which in the end is not the universal but the singular and unique.²⁸ This appreciation of the singular is crucial because, according to a principle of the immanence and self-formation of meaning and value, »each life has its own sense.«²⁹

Because of its concern for the unique (*Einmaligen*) and because the observer falls within the observed, the praxis of history addresses a responsive practice or art. The human science of history is as much an art as a science such that it cannot be reduced to the status of a science.³⁰ History cannot be a science which reduces art to method, lived-experience to rules, and the singular to the universal. It is rather an art which incorporates scientific reflection and methods. Yet, contrary to Gadamer's criticism, Dilthey rejected as inadequate an artless rule-based hermeneutics.³¹ For hermeneutics and the study of history, method cannot suffice without lived experience³²; nor can knowledge occur

²⁵ GS I, 10 / SW I, 62.

²⁶ GS XVIII, 52 and 54.

²⁷ GS I, 37 / SW I, 88-89.

²⁸ GS XVIII, 105.

²⁹ GS VII, 199 / SW III, 221.

³⁰ GS XVIII, 68, 105.

³¹ GS XIV, 710 / SW IV, 150.

³² GS XIV, 605, 647-648 / SW IV, 42, 87.

without art.³³ Dilthey noted the importance of method to inquiry while arguing for the pragmatic conditions, the plurality and flexibility of methods in the human sciences.³⁴ This is because of Dilthey's suspicion of a general explanatory method applied to all aspects of history. Methods can only be evaluated through their application and results.³⁵ It is the task of inquiry itself, how the object presents itself in its givenness, which determines methodology in the human sciences rather than a unified theoretical standpoint.³⁶ Because of its basis in experience and an informed practice (art), history responds to the empiricity (*Empirie*) and facticity that addresses human agents. History is therefore inherently empirical and reflective in presupposing experience and art without, however, abandoning the possibility of extending itself through theory. History is inevitably narrative in that it explores, reproduces and transforms the narrative processes and structures of historical life. Life is not merely given or exhausted in its »givenness.« It occurs as understood and interpreted through narrative and in relation to the interruption of narrative. The need for narrative, which is not fulfilled in art or science, is fulfilled in the human sciences which concern themselves not with facts or events isolated from their narrative and life-contexts but with the narrative processes and structures of human experience, particularly biography and history. History originates not in the event but in the expectations, experiences, and memories of the event. That is, in the telling of the event, which indicate the need for narrative self-understanding and enactment as an articulation of human experience in its historical life.³⁷ The writing of history is a free narrative art rather than a conceptual system of laws and propositions. Both the science of history and factual history resist the status of a unified theory, whether metaphysical-speculative or causal-deductive.

³³ GS XIV, 695 / SW IV, 136.

³⁴ GS V, 42.

³⁵ GS V, 42.

³⁶ GS V, 44.

³⁷ Compare Dilthey's discussions of history and narrative (GS I, 40 / SW I, 91; GS XVI, 100, 106 / SW IV, 261, 269).

History as an art, concerned with the bond between the singular and the universal³⁸, can only partially narrate and reflect aspects of a vast totality; it can only recover remnants of the stratified past.³⁹ History is scientific insofar as it has scientific-empirical means of studying the past through documents and statistics.⁴⁰ History is artistic since – like art – it demands the employment of the imagination and ingenuity of the historian.⁴¹ The historian cannot proceed through conceptual thought alone as »there is no understanding apart from a feeling of value,« and the practice of history »requires a feeling for the power of the unique and a sense for inner connections among ideas.«⁴²

History demands the formation of feeling and sense on the part of the historian and yet it cannot simply remain with that feeling and sense since it is confronted by the distance and interval that undermines the self-presence of intuition and contemplation. Dilthey thus criticized limiting interpretation to »an aesthetic sensibility that grasps the whole in feeling, but finds itself incapable of reproducing it intelligibly. . .«⁴³ This lack of linguistic and conceptual mediation, which is the only way we have of knowing ourselves or the world, is in fact the failure of the historical school: »Historical vision and comparative procedures by themselves are incapable of establishing an autonomous system of the human sciences or of exerting any influence on life.«⁴⁴ Because the historical school lost itself in the particular, Dilthey sought to articulate its philosophical and theoretical basis.⁴⁵ History, and the art and practice of human scientific inquiry in general, cannot avoid the necessity of theoretical reflection.⁴⁶

³⁸ GS I, 90-91 / SW I, 140-141.

³⁹ GS I, 25 / SW I, 76.

⁴⁰ GS I, 15 / SW I, 77.

⁴¹ GS I, 40 / SW I, 91.

⁴² GS V, 336 / SW IV, 255; GS XIV, 638 / SW IV, 77.

⁴³ GS XIV, 650, 680 / SW IV, 90, 121. On the aesthetic and its limits in Dilthey, see Nelson: *Disturbing Truth: Art, Finitude, and the Human Sciences in Dilthey*, in: *theory@buffalo*. Vol. 11: *Aesthetics and Finitude* (2007), 121-142.

⁴⁴ GS I, xvi / SW I, 48.

⁴⁵ GS I, xvii / SW I, 49.

⁴⁶ GS I, 27 / SW I, 79.

History is inherently both art and science, a narrative practice informed by methodological empirical inquiry. History as art and science can be taken up self-reflectively by the historian, yet history is bound to both its artistic and scientific conditions. History cannot, given its contexts and conditions, recover the past or predict and form the future as presence, it cannot overcome the distance which is its own condition. The factual historicity of human life does not only make historical social and self knowledge possible through self-reflection and empirical inquiry, but it already implicates the project of knowledge in its own impossibility as a unifying cognitive system. Metaphysical and speculative approaches to the philosophy of history are problematized by the very facticity, multiplicity and singularity of historicity. Dilthey emphasizes the fragility of systematization, as historical reflection and inquiry cannot exhaust the historicity and facticity of human life.⁴⁷

4. Dilthey's Critique of Identity: Philosophy of History and Sociology

»[...] the boundless *ambiguity* of the *material* of history became evident. This showed the *futility of the teleological principle of historical knowledge*.« – Wilhelm Dilthey⁴⁸

»My attack on sociology thus cannot be directed against a discipline of this sort [i.e., the science of social organizations], but is rather aimed at a science that seeks to comprehend in one science everything which occurs de facto within human society. Such comprehension would be based on the following principle: Whatever occurs within human society in the course of its history must be integrated into the unity of one and the same object.« – Wilhelm Dilthey⁴⁹

Dilthey recognized the legitimate use of categories such as identity, totality and unity in ordinary life and the sciences. However, Dilthey developed arguments against the reification of identity, systematic totality and unity in metaphysics, the philosophy of history and Comte's sociology. These arguments are not

⁴⁷ GS VIII, 38-39.

⁴⁸ GS I, 374-375 / SW I, 208.

⁴⁹ GS XIX, 421 / SW I, 498.

simply a rejection of synthetic and constructive unities but are positive in articulating the significance and value of the singular and the individual in life and for the formation of the human sciences. Dilthey's anti-reductive motif runs against the tendencies of the philosophy of history, sociology and unified science by asserting the complexity of the sense of history.⁵⁰ It is not the speculative-metaphysical philosophy of history or a totalizing social science that can elucidate the historicity of human life. Dilthey argued post-metaphysically that it is in fact the human sciences that are the sole means for explaining history.⁵¹ He argued further for the plurality of the human sciences, the inherent multiplicity of their methods and objects, against Comte's vision of a unifying science of positive sociology.⁵² It is the ambiguity and materiality of history itself that undermines the metaphysical basis and claims of the philosophy of history and the totalizing sociology of the positivism of Comte.⁵³ Dilthey argued for a thorough methodological pluralism against the claims of integrating metaphysics or science from his early to later thought. What are the reasons for resisting the systematizing unity of cognitive thought and why is this resistance not irrelevant?

Against the »Platonism« of metaphysics, Dilthey argued that the unfathomability of the world shows that every system is one sided. Dilthey goes further than noting the fact of the disagreement of metaphysical systems to criticize the metaphysical tradition itself. In an early note, Dilthey suggested: »The thought that the logos is present in humans is diametrically opposed to my approach. This parousia has become through [...] Plato and Christianity the middle point of German philosophy.«⁵⁴ This historical and critical approach to metaphysics would be developed in the *Introduction to the Human Sciences* as the impossibility of redeeming metaphysics and the necessity for empirical-experiential inquiry.

According to the young Dilthey, the whole cannot be explained, whether as nature or history, and there is no need to constitute a whole, least of all as it has

⁵⁰ GS I, 97-98 / SW I, 146-147.

⁵¹ GS I, 94 / SW I, 143.

⁵² GS I, 93 / SW I, 142; GS XIX, 421-423 / SW I, 498-500.

⁵³ GS I, 93 / SW I, 142.

⁵⁴ GS XVIII, 200-201.

been done in the philosophy of history.⁵⁵ Dilthey distinguished from early on the difference in kind between the whole as context (*Zusammenhang*) and as an abstract constructed system. The latter isolates aspects of the former in order to achieve an ahistorical abstract conception of the whole. Dilthey differentiated the contextual whole from the abstract systematic whole, for example, in a discussion of the holism of early modern hermeneutics.⁵⁶ The whole is known through partial systems, which in isolation face the danger of false abstraction. Because thought is not self-contained and cannot constitute itself as a whole without aporia and antinomy, excess and remainder, there is no measure by which to separate and isolate the empirical and the philosophical.⁵⁷ The conceptually constructed whole is always referred to further contexts that it has not produced. In this sense, Dilthey denied the assertion of the identity of the true and the made or the known and the produced, since – for example – »there is more than knowledge in a poem or in a letter of St. Paul«.⁵⁸

Metaphysical and speculative philosophy of history assumes the intelligibility of a temporal whole that can be conceptually known in a systematic function. Even the more reflective conception of history argued for by Kant, which undermined the finality of history for a reflectively posited goal which could be posited by self-developing humanity, still presupposed the duality of what is (the empirical human being) and what ought to be (the ideal of humanity) and its mediation through and as history.⁵⁹ Although Kant was one of the first to allow history into his philosophical thought without reducing it to formulas, Kant's conception of history did not go far enough in understanding the practical and ethical from out of historical practical life.⁶⁰ Kant had begun to show the way of understanding history responsively from out of itself, although Dilthey concludes that Kant – like the Neo-Kantians who followed him – did not overcome the residues of metaphysical duality between the intelligible and the sensible.

⁵⁵ GS XVIII, 15, 47.

⁵⁶ GS XIV, 603, 605 / SW IV, 40, 42.

⁵⁷ GS I, 113 / SW I, 163.

⁵⁸ GS V, 336 / SW IV, 256.

⁵⁹ GS XI, 140-142 / SW IV, 299, 301.

⁶⁰ GS XI, 141 / SW IV, 299.

History has sense and significance immanent in itself. The inherent significance of history and life emerges in relation its ambiguity, indeterminacy, and plurality, and in the recognition of the possible non-intelligibility of life – since life is both significant and unfathomable in its immanence. The pretheoretical significance of life, a thesis which powerfully resonates with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body, does not exclude but emerges from facticity.⁶¹ The facticity of life implies for Dilthey both the precognitive significance of the life-nexus and the self-distanced interrupted character of life. Dilthey thus rejected the teleological-metaphysical presupposition of the inherent intelligibility of the world insofar as life is both always already significant and bound to what resists and disturbs sense and significance.

The purposive character of lived experience does not imply teleological finality, either for the individual or the species. The purposes which emerge from the practical interests of historical life are reified in the teleology or philosophy of history, in its idea of a pre-given determinate goal or even more open and indeterminate teleologies that still reflectively affirm one goal of development and progress. Dilthey advocated the potential for progress but showed its unstable and fragile character by arguing for its relative character. The empirical and interpretive investigation of formation and development in history does not allow the demonstration of the realization of a teleological goal or a necessary progress.⁶² Progress as such can not be proved.⁶³ Nor is it an appropriate ideal insofar as it judges every culture and epoch according to the standard of one's own present. The idea of progress undermines the possibility of being receptive to the address of what is other than oneself in subordinating the other to the finality of a developmental schema. Dilthey challenged this argument, for example, in Schleiermacher's placement of Christianity at the height of a historical-developmental schema that subordinated all other religions. He would question the exclusivity of progress from his early reading of Schleiermacher to

⁶¹ On the immanent ordering in sensation and experience in Dilthey, see GS V, 79.

⁶² GS VII, 253 / SW III, 272.

⁶³ GS III, 238 / SW IV, 355.

his later thinking of the irresolvable plurality and conflict of worldviews and perspectives.⁶⁴

The philosophy of history had imposed principles and formulas abstracted from aspects of life back onto that life as a whole. Instead of this reifying strategy, which denied the very facticity of life, Dilthey argued for an immanent strategy of responsively understanding history and its movements through and out of historical life itself. Life is already significant before it is explicitly or conceptually known even as language and thought are required to articulate and reflect on that sense and significance. Human life can be articulated as significant prior to knowledge and, further, that knowledge of human life already depends upon and occurs within the significance and nexus of ordinary human life. In the human sciences, especially history, the objects of inquiry are »already known« (*bekannt*) in the sense of being understood before they are conceptually cognized in *Erkenntnis*.⁶⁵ Understanding therefore precedes and provides the basis for the conceptual cognition (*Erkenntnis*) which potentially transforms it. The *bekannt* is the basis for the *erkannt* and yet the former can enact a transformation of the latter.

Historical knowledge presupposes the understanding of a historical being in which there is an interdependence of fact and law, reality and meaning, feeling of value and rule. These are already active in human life and come to be recognized only in self-reflection.⁶⁶ The self-reflection of a being related interpretively to its world is the basis of conceptual cognition. The individual is not an isolated single existence enclosed within its representational consciousness or egoity. It is instead a complex and a complexity that includes and is related to the feelings of life of others, society, and even nature.⁶⁷

There is a sense of the whole in the individual beginning with the cogiveness of self and world. This whole, however, can never be made fully intelligible and systematized in concepts without the excess and remainder that forces such

⁶⁴ Dilthey's early criticisms of Schleiermacher's thought concentrated on the unifying tendency of its conceptualism and its lack of historicity in subordinating the historical to the ideal (see SW IV).

⁶⁵ GS I, 120 / SW I, 168.

⁶⁶ GS I, 120 / SW I, 169.

⁶⁷ GS V, 60; GS XVIII, 177.

systems into aporia and antinomy. There is then some legitimacy in Husserl and Rickert's criticism of Dilthey's »skepticism.« The young Dilthey himself called his approach a »moderate skepticism« which had the suspension of hypothetical explanation as a consequence.⁶⁸ It is not the modern skepticism of Descartes and unconditional doubt that we find at work in Dilthey's works. It is more akin to the ancient skepticism that doubted knowledge and theory in order to affirm the value of practical social-historical life. Nevertheless, the skepticism charge is incorrect since it assimilated Dilthey's »life-philosophy« to the modern method of universal doubt and Dilthey never did deny the validity and value of knowledge but sought to investigate its context in human life.

Philosophy of history and positive sociology attempted to constitute a totalizing whole out of the multiplicity of social-historical life. As such, it enacts a closure rather than an opening of the possibilities of life. It is an attempt to limit and master its virtuality and singular/plural structure- and event-character. Interpretive reflection (*Besinnung*) has a worldly and bodily reference insofar as sense (*Sinn*) is related to the sensual (*sinnlich*). This is a thesis that Neo-Kantians such as Rickert deny not in the name of the duality of mind and body but rather of facticity and validity.⁶⁹ According to Rickert, Life can only be understood transcendently from the intelligible rather than immanently from out of itself.⁷⁰ In interpretive reflection (*Besinnung*) on history and the historicity of understanding, however, Dilthey shows how issues of facticity come to the fore in contrast with Neo-Kantian transcendental philosophy as well as the »strong« holistic and teleological interpretation of history and society associated with Hegel and historicism. Dilthey already developed a powerful critique of these interconnected tendencies in the *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, and accordingly criticized the philosophy of history, in its metaphysical form, for the loss of value it enacts in reducing the past to the present and in treating it as only having value in relation to the present.⁷¹

In the anti-historicity of this »presentism«, a charge already made early on against Schleiermacher, the past becomes an imperfect now and is temporality

⁶⁸ GS XVIII, 3.

⁶⁹ Heinrich Rickert: *Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft*. Stuttgart 1986, 11.

⁷⁰ Rickert, 1986, 11.

⁷¹ GS VIII, 129.

is leveled to the today.⁷² This is translated into the model of a linear series infinitely nearing perfection, or its constructed dialectical achievement in the absolute, in which the now is reduced to a series of identical now points. Dilthey opposed this model with the insight into historicity that undermines schemas imposed upon history, i.e., the facticity of history and the aporetic and antagonistic character of history.

The aporia and antinomy, which signify the impossibility of an adequate or true unifying system, are not merely negative limits to knowledge. For Dilthey, they do not so much signify the conclusion or elimination of thought as they are productive of thinking itself.⁷³ That is, as expressed in Dilthey's later thought, history is not the positing or constructing of identity. It is conflict (*Streit*) and an irreconcilable conflict (*Widerstreit*) between heterogeneous and incommensurable forces and perspectives.⁷⁴ In this encounter and confrontation with the facticity of history, understanding and interpretation only occur through the contingency, diversity, and tensions of social-historical life.

Dilthey's thinking of history is connected to the question of the time of past, present and future. Dilthey would both highlight and decenter the primacy of the present that dominates metaphysics and the sciences. Dilthey recognized that the past will always be approached through the interests and perspectives of the present: »We understand the past only through the present, that is, only so much of the past as is congenial to our present.⁷⁵ Despite this necessity, Dilthey argued at different times for how the past should not be reduced to the present,⁷⁶ the present must be understood out of time rather than time out of the present,⁷⁷ and, more radically, that the present is never simply present to itself.⁷⁸ This is not due to the timeless perspective of eternity. The present is always already self-displaced and self-distanced insofar as it is informed by a past and future that it cannot master. Feelings, for example, are not exclusively based in the

⁷² GS VIII, 129.

⁷³ GS I, 279.

⁷⁴ GS VIII, 131-134.

⁷⁵ GS XX, 110 / SW IV, 233.

⁷⁶ GS XIV, 618 / SW IV, 56; GS VIII, 5.

⁷⁷ GS XVIII, 122.

⁷⁸ GS VII, 73 / SW III, 94.

present. They can be oriented toward the future in fear and hope and can linger over the failures and successes of our past.⁷⁹

The multidimensionality of historical time resists the unity of the consciousness of time, which is itself always within time and history. History cannot be understood from the mere fact of or the character of human temporality. The future might not then be a continuation of the present, it is unknown and unexpected, and the past can never be fully recovered in its presence: »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.«⁸⁰ The relation between historical event and historical material is not given but must be freely reconstructed.⁸¹ It requires reconstruction because, as Dilthey wrote elsewhere, the »silence of death lingers over the extended space of these ruins.«⁸² The question of reconstruction, as theoretically informed understanding and interpretation, forces the question of the possibility and character of Dilthey's hermeneutics of historical life.

5. Who understands better? Hermeneutics, Historicity, and the Other

Dilthey's thought is incompatible with traditional philosophy of history and the ordinary model of understanding that finds its primary expression in standard views such as Hegel's idealism and Comte's positivism. Understanding is commonly interpreted according to a model of »understanding better« that can be understood either as the appropriation of dialectics or as the tendency toward the unsaid and unthought of the author.⁸³ »Understanding better« implies for Dilthey that we cannot simply remain within the self-understanding and self-presentation of the other, since interpretation moves from these toward the unconscious, the language, and movement of thought of the other, none of

⁷⁹ GS XVIII, 178.

⁸⁰ GS XX, 110 / SW IV, 233.

⁸¹ GS XX, 101, 110 / SW IV, 230, 234.

⁸² GS I, 280.

⁸³ GS XIV, 707 / SW IV, 147.

which are self-transparent.⁸⁴ Accordingly, Dilthey concluded that »The ultimate goal of the hermeneutic process is to understand an author better than he understood himself. This is a principle that is the necessary consequence of the theory of unconscious creation.«⁸⁵

Does the maxim of »understanding the author better than he understood himself,« which Dilthey took up from Kant and Schleiermacher, mean violating and mastering the other in subordinating alterity to one's own identity? There are, of course, different ways of interpreting »understanding better.« Even for the early Dilthey, understanding cannot mean understanding the »most primitive self« of the other.⁸⁶ We are not in the position to construct the original constitution of an individual, much less by means of isolating the individual as an isolated atom.⁸⁷ Each individual is a world differentiated from every other⁸⁸, such that each individual is both a receptive crossing point of social systems as well as an active co-agent in social-historical life.⁸⁹

Since one cannot reach the other, at least *as* other, through the schemas of induction or deduction, an alternative approach is demanded. The other is not primarily an »object of research,« but rather an individual who can be recognized and appreciated through one's own openness and sense of possibilities. Relating to the other requires the reflectiveness of geniality and art, both of which are already implicitly at work in the practices of the nexus of historical life. It should be noted that art here does not mean aesthetics or the result of the application of a pre-given rule or subsuming a particular under a concept. Art is a practice informed by self-reflection.

Understanding is the way humans are involved and participate in life.⁹⁰ As such, understanding is formative and requires cultivation. It is an art rather than method, the richness and plurality of lived-experience rather than mechanical rules. Further, understanding and its development in interpretation requires a

⁸⁴ GS XIV, 707 / SW IV, 148.

⁸⁵ GS V, 331 / SW IV, 250.

⁸⁶ GS XVIII, 106.

⁸⁷ GS V, 60.

⁸⁸ GS V, 61.

⁸⁹ GS V, 63.

⁹⁰ GS XIX, 277 / SW I, 439.

basic receptiveness to the other which challenges the reduction of the other to one's own present. Thus, according to Dilthey, the richer and more multiple one is, the more possibilities are opened for access to the other and reproducing the other's individuality.⁹¹ Understanding approaches the individual other indirectly through a preliminary overview of the whole such that the event of nearing the other, a nearing that never completely overcomes the temporal and spatial distance or interval (*Abstand*) criticized by Gadamer, can redefine that whole.⁹² Understanding presupposes, on the hand, the vitality and virtuosity of the interpreter and, on the other hand, a yielding receptiveness to what or who is being interpreted. »The measure of understanding lies,« according to Dilthey, »in the vitality of the person« and »This vitality must be bound to a yielding to objects that is bound by facticity.«⁹³ Understanding is bound to facticity. It is not purely intellectual and representational but tied to feeling and will which encounters the other as an irreducible, if not irremovable, force: »Precisely because each inner life is related to my life, it is there for me as a force – a force that limits my existence. Here, too, force is always active and productive, just as in external nature every process is conditioned by the lasting effects of pressure, impact, stimulus. My feeling of life is determined at every moment.«⁹⁴ Self-feeling and self-consciousness are conditioned by the surrounding medium of the world.⁹⁵

My existence, primarily given to me in my feeling of life, is determined by what is other than myself as much as it is active and productive. Activity is tied to passivity, spontaneity to receptivity. However, receptivity cannot be a pure passivity insofar as it must actively reach out toward the other. Receptivity

⁹¹ GS XVIII, 104.

⁹² GS XVIII, 108. Gadamer claimed: »Daß ich Sprache als der Weise der Vermittlung ansehe, in der Kontinuität der Geschichte über alle Abstände und Diskontinuitäten zustandekommt, scheint mir durch die angedeuteten phänomene wohlbegründet.« In: Hans-Georg Gadamer: Hermeneutik II. Tübingen 1993, 143-144. For Gadamer, Dilthey is a threatening thinker of *Abstände*, of the distances, intervals, and differences that disrupt the continuity of history as tradition (*ibid.*, 34).

⁹³ GS XIX, 293 / SW I, 454.

⁹⁴ GS XIX, 278 / SW I, 440.

⁹⁵ GS XVIII, 166.

always presupposes spontaneity.⁹⁶ Understanding – as the responsiveness of life – occurs in-between the self and the other, and as life between activity and passivity, spontaneity, and receptivity.

The idea of interpretation in Dilthey does not follow the model of mastering the other or assimilation to one's own, as it is neither intuition nor subsuming. Since it is not only based in the unity of representational concepts, interpretation cannot avoid the resistances of facticity, force, and materiality. Understanding is the movement toward the situation of the other.⁹⁷ As such, it demands the activity of receptivity. Understanding cannot mean then the inclusion or assimilation of the other to one's self or one's own. It is rather it is constituted in the movement of an extension of myself toward (*hin*) the other through understanding »after« and »again« (the »nach« of *Nachverständnis*) and consequently, I would add, inherently »anew« because of the interval or distance (*Abstand* or *Distanz*) presupposed in the »nach«.⁹⁸ In German, »nach« implies a repetition as does »wieder,« hence the translation of »nach-« as »re-«, yet this »nach« has a sense of temporal and spatial distance or interval that challenges the idea that this movement involves a recovery or repetition of identity or self-presence. »Nach« is always »after the fact.« The transposition between self and other operates as a process of translation and retranslation. For Dilthey, inevitably »transposition is transformation,« and alterity is an aporia that forces the transition from hermeneutics to the theory of knowledge, for which »possibility of grasping what is other or alien is one of the most profound epistemological problems.«⁹⁹

Dilthey transformed the hermeneutic notion of »understanding better« and its relation to purposiveness from Kant and Schleiermacher without, however, reducing it to the identity and assimilation of dialectic. I will argue, in addition, that Dilthey's case is a departure from the »understanding better« that informs a determinate teleology of history as the realization of one pre-given goal, i.e., the dialectics that is a model in which what is other is either to be assimilated or excluded, mediated, or canceled (*Aufhebung*).

⁹⁶ GS V, 82.

⁹⁷ GS XIV, 618 / SW IV, 56.

⁹⁸ GS XVIII, 108.

⁹⁹ GS V, 334 / SW IV, 253.

The »mediating« way of enacting understanding in dialectics refuses to put its own self-understanding at risk in encountering the other. Against such a risk of exposure to the depth of the other and the world, it reinstates narrative and teleological representation against its breakdowns, failures and limits. Every limit is to be »transgressed« in order to be »re-appropriated.« This »progressive« model privileges one moment of temporality over another according to a line of development in which the other is a »lesser version« of myself. History is interpreted in strong versions of teleology not according to its character as event and context. It prescribes a narrative of purpose proceeding from origin to goal (condition to result). It is a narrative that involves judging history through an assumption of superiority and privilege based on a teleological order that exists independently of temporal immanence. Dilthey did not reject categories such as progress, yet he did redefine them in relation to the present and its immanent temporality.¹⁰⁰ This temporality does not imply a linear series infinitely nearing perfection, since the present is a conflict of forces, tendencies, and worldviews.¹⁰¹ The outcome is uncertain even as progress or multiple futures are projected on the basis of the present. In Kantian terms, this is done in order to reflectively orient practice.

6. History and Purposiveness

Dilthey investigated the step from the experience of purposiveness in human life to more determinate forms of teleology imposed upon the world, life, and history as such. He undertook a loosening of teleology by relating this form of explanation back to lived purposive structures.¹⁰² Dilthey continued to use words like »purpose« and »teleology« by analyzing them as moments immanent and relative to history and life. For example, both individuals and groups can be said to be purposive or teleological in being oriented toward goals. Dilthey abstracted teleological thinking from its metaphysical presuppositions and

¹⁰⁰ GS VII, 345-346 / SW III, 366-367.

¹⁰¹ GS VIII, 131-136.

¹⁰² GS XIX, 384.

related it back to experiences of the purposiveness in human life, as purposes lie exclusively within the realm of social-historical spirit.¹⁰³

Purposes occur in human life from going to the barber shop in order to get a hair cut (i.e., intentional goal-oriented individual activity) to the self-reproduction of the economy or government apparatus (i.e., organizations which reproduce themselves regardless of the intentions of individuals in a goal like manner or at least in a way that can be analyzed in purposive language). Dilthey analyzes »purposive systems« of culture and the external organization of society in functionalist terms.¹⁰⁴ This accounts for the role of structural-functional strategies of social-scientific explanation in Dilthey's philosophy of the human science and why Dilthey is sometimes taken as a forerunner of neofunctionalist systems theory. Functionalism, it should also be noted, presupposes not only collective unities but equally their differentiation. Dilthey could, like Durkheim, characterize modernity as an epoch of individuation.¹⁰⁵

Despite the purposiveness within life, life resists the positing of a hidden order, an ultimate determining goal or condition of explanation that would displace and hide the dimension of depth and hiddenness. In the displacement of this depth, to adopt the later Heidegger's language, the very openness of life would be eliminated as its open singular-plural form (*Gestalt*) became an enclosing frame (*Ge-stell*). Life, as the virtual openness of possibilities, is not then a cause or principle in the sense of an efficient or teleological condition. Events are related to a nexus and context (*Zusammenhang*) without being exhausted by them; the »circle« of occurrence and context is not one in which event and context can be mediated.

Understanding inevitably involves a sense of the unique¹⁰⁶ and concerns a singular (*Einzelnes*), i.e., »the individual, not merely as an example of the human in general but as an individual whole«. ¹⁰⁷ Interpretation is a different way of relating to the world than explanation which reduces one phenomenon to

¹⁰³ GS I, 18 / SW I, 69.

¹⁰⁴ GS I, 43-44 / SW I, 94-95.

¹⁰⁵ GS I, 352 / SW I, 186. On individuation and modernity in Durkheim, see William Watts Miller: *Durkheim, Morals and Modernity*. Montreal 1996, 104.

¹⁰⁶ GS XVIII, 108.

¹⁰⁷ GS VII, 212 / SW III, 233.

another (the singular to the type, the part to the whole). It is in non-identical relatedness that events and structures, individuals and types, come into word in articulating meaning.¹⁰⁸ Thus the teleological character of a structural nexus is a form of »tendency toward striving according to purposes« (*Zielstrebigkeit*) rather than the realization of a determinate end given by either God or nature.¹⁰⁹ »Teleology« not only has a more indeterminate character in Dilthey's thought. It has a further openness to a plurality of ends and to interruptions and transitions of purposiveness.

Dilthey radically questioned the idea of totality as system striving according to one determinate goal, whether it is understood as a speculative actuality or a regulative demand. Dilthey calls for proceeding from the immanent experiences, self-interpretations, and analysis of life that leads and signifies beyond themselves in opposition to the construction of systems that are externally and schematically superimposed upon life.¹¹⁰ Likewise, Dilthey critiques the destruction of the historical nexus through totality, agreeing with critics of teleological history: »The grouping of particular data on the basis of a total idea of some historical period into a system everywhere destroys the nexus of basic causes and phenomena, and hence also the actual historical about which we are concerned, and substitutes for it a fictitious and abstract connection.«¹¹¹ From Dilthey's work, the whole as an infinite depth and thus in a sense indeterminate context of relations can be distinguished from relative »wholes« or »totalities« of structural-functional systems of the external organization of society (economy and state), the realms of cultural reproduction (from ordinary life to the arts and sciences), and of the purposiveness of the person. A structural totality is a particular nexus within a wider context. This context is a changing one such that structural systems assume, fixate, or ignore their environment (their outside) with significant consequences. Even if the neofunctionalist »cybernetic« or »systems« theory of society explains society as a functional interaction between structural systems and larger environments that are never simply given, it is still committed only to explanatory holism and fails

¹⁰⁸ GS VII, 288 / SW III, 307-308.

¹⁰⁹ GS VII, 329-330 / SW III, 349-350.

¹¹⁰ GS VII, 266, 276 / SW III, 284, 295.

¹¹¹ GS XI, 154 / SW IV, 313.

to develop the interpretive and normative dimensions of individual and social life that Dilthey articulated.

The hermeneutical »circle«, at work in his thought since his early study of hermeneutics, is neither a closed totality nor an enclosing speculative circle that explicates self-related meaning while re-appropriating every disruption of appropriation; nor can it be exclusively understood as the functionalist interaction of an organism (system) with its environment. Structural-functionalist social science finds its justification in hermeneutics rather than viceversa. The hermeneutical circle occurs in the relation of and between the whole and the singular. It is therefore a relation of meaning and facticity rather than an explanation of an effect produced by a cause governed by a covering law. Both singular and context cannot be taken as completely determined by the other or reduced to one another through teleological, functional, or efficient explanation.

The hermeneutical »circle« can be seen in the »as« character of understanding. The hermeneutical circle is not the speculative circle that subsumes the determined »part« under a determinate whole. For Dilthey, it is crucial to differentiate the knowledge of what is singular and that which is universal, and »remain aware that we can never allow what is singular to be fully submerged by what is universal«.¹¹² Dilthey critiques historians such as Schlosser who directly evaluate every particular by a universal and fail »to recognize the worth and independence of individuals as well as nations«.¹¹³ Disfiguring the many-sidedness of historical realities through one-sidedness is not a moral but a methodological failure.¹¹⁴ The imperative to preserve the singular arises from the historical consciousness that aims at a concrete or historical universal; i.e., »a universality that is always and everywhere bound to historical thought«.¹¹⁵

Dilthey did not reject purposiveness or narrative in his critique of teleology. Purpose and the purposiveness of narrative, however, are rethought in relation to what resists and possibly reverses them. Life, history and society are not seamless closed totalities. They face their own incomprehensibility,

¹¹² GS V, 337 / SW IV, 256-257.

¹¹³ GS XI, 152 / SW IV, 311-312.

¹¹⁴ GS XI, 153 / SW IV, 312.

¹¹⁵ GS V, 338 / SW IV, 258.

incommensurability, and indeterminacy. One is located in an immanent whole that is never fully immediate or transparent without the interruption and intervals of mediation.¹¹⁶ Such immanence lacks the immediacy and transparency of complete self-contained presence, as it involves a relatedness or »mediateness« without the closure and integration of totality and system. Life confronts me as always »mine« and yet – in its facticity, its finitude, and infinite depth – resists conceptualization and cognition.¹¹⁷ The mineness of life is an originary exposure to its basic non-originaryness; that is, to facticity, singularity, and contingency.¹¹⁸

7. Understanding, Interpretation, and Historicity

The significance of the human sciences is situated in relation to a prescientific life-nexus and its forms of understanding. The understanding found in the human sciences is a derivative form informed by reflection. Yet the human sciences could not be what they are or function without the historicity and the life-nexus that they presuppose and the multiplicity of forms of reflection and inquiry that they involve: Considerations of epistemology, strategies of interpretation and explanation, questions of methodology, and the pursuit of theory. The distance (*Abstand*) that is thereby introduced is already operative in the everyday life-world itself. The nexus of life is neither self-transparent nor a continuous and seamless totality, its pretheoretical significance addresses us but it calls for a reflectively informed response. Contrary to both intellectualism and anti-intellectualism, such methodological and theoretical considerations do not make up the whole of understanding nor are the human sciences and empirical research external to questions of understanding. Dilthey's philosophy of the human sciences proceeds through an »interpretive phenomenology« of historical consciousness and the life to which consciousness is bound. It both anticipates Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity and suggests a significant alternative to it.

¹¹⁶ Compare Rodi, 1990, 10.

¹¹⁷ GS XIX, 346-347.

¹¹⁸ GS XIX, 348.

Dilthey's account of understanding, interpretation, and the life-world or nexus – in which these occur – implies both the holism and individualism of ordinary understanding and its cultivated form in the human sciences. In the philosophy of the social sciences, holism and individualism are typically categorized as contradictory positions. The questions we need to address here are: (1) how can an emphasis on the individual still be social-historical, (2) how is it that multiplicity and plurality are in some sense a whole, and (3) how is holism still perspectival?¹¹⁹

The individual is essentially social-historical and worldly, i.e., is always contextual and relational, such that this relationality needs to be explored rather than reduced to an abstract atomistic individual (as is done in contemporary methodological individualism such as rational choice theory) or to society as an integrated systematic totality without residue (as is done in the methodological collectivism of organic, functionalist and structuralist approaches to society). Social-historical reality cannot be reduced to the isolated individual or structure because both are always mediated through the intersubjectivity of the life-nexus which reproduces itself through communication (expression and understanding). Methodological individualism and collectivism are legitimate strategies of inquiry for Dilthey's methodological pluralism as long as the limits and presuppositions of both are recognized. Instead of Habermas' twofold approach of system and life-world, Dilthey developed the threefold relationality of individual, systems, and life-nexus.

The lived connectedness of individuality, social structures and life context indicates the possibility of coordinating interpretation and explanation: That is, the interpretive first person perspective, both plural and singular, with the explanatory third person perspective, both individual and collective. Dilthey never rejected this third person perspective; he situated it in the context of the categories of life and social-historical life. Further, »there are no fixed boundaries between interpretation and explanation, only differences in degree.«¹²⁰ There is a role in Dilthey's thought for both efficient causality, which subsumes particulars under governing laws, and the social causality,

119 GS V, 40.

120 GS V, 336 / SW IV, 255.

which subordinates particulars to governing functional systems and structures. These are, however, subordinated to the interpretive context of human life.

Dilthey's methodological pluralism provides the means for addressing questions of who and how as well as what and why. Interpretation asks questions of who and how rather than explaining a what through a why. It brings to light the relations and the between of the singular and its context or »whole,« of the individual and its milieu. The primacy of understanding and interpretation, however, undermines the reification of theoretical-explanatory approaches to social-historical life. Hermeneutics indicates the interrelation of the singular and the universal, and thus »the theory of interpretation becomes an important connecting link between philosophy and the historical sciences.«¹²¹ The relation of the singular and the universal, the individual and its context, is opposed to the hypostatization of explanation in metaphysics that demands a reduction of the singular and the infinite to an ultimate unitary ground behind or beyond life; whether this ground be conceived rationalistically as reason, cause, principle, and *archē* or more non-rationally as the mystical and ineffable.

Dilthey distinguished interpretation and explanation as varieties of scientific discourse without suggesting that they can be completely separated. Understanding and interpretation cannot then be made into a fundamental discipline that can ignore empirical and explanatory modes of inquiry. The human sciences are sciences of individuals and groups, including interpretive (i.e., related to the significance and facticity of the life-nexus) and explanatory (i.e., efficient and functional-structural) approaches to both. For Dilthey, the objects of the human sciences – which include individuals and groups; habits, customs, and traditions; actions, practices, institutions, and structures – require the use and coordination of both explanation and interpretation in their holistic, structural-functional, and individualistic forms. This methodological pluralism, a pluralism incompatible with robust holism and a strong teleology that sets one determinate function or end, informs his thought from his early conception of a critique of historical reason (or judgment) to the hermeneutics of historical life unfolded in his later works.

¹²¹ GS V, 317, 331 / SW IV, 235, 250.

Even as Dilthey is indebted to concepts and strategies from Hegel, he critiques his metaphysical absolutism, political statism, and overwhelming holism. The whole is not a systematic totality or identity; it is a singular-plural event and structure (i.e., nexus). Totality for Dilthey does not mean final identity or unity but the infinite complexity which escapes and withdraws from the legitimate striving for identity and unity. The singular-plural character of life, the empiricity and virtuality of its possibilities, are life as a intertwined whole insofar as life itself is the »between« and self-distanced spacing of self and other and singular and whole. The whole is thus the infinite complexity and richness of possibilities that resist being reduced to the finality of one teleological potential. The whole is multiple and plural such that it is never fully a determinate or systematic totality.

Interpretation is inevitably limited by the conditions of its own activity and is finite in relation to the infinite complexity and fullness of what is to be interpreted. The whole can be anticipated through a sense of the whole, yet receptivity alters and revises that sense. The sense of the whole is fluid rather than fixed and altered and revised in encountering the different, the new, and the other. The life-nexus and life itself present themselves as wholes, yet knowledge as analytic and procedural is partial and incomplete. The whole can never be completely or systematically expressed without antinomy and aporia. In this case, understanding and knowledge are always already referred to further contexts and wholes without being able to reduce or systematize them. Human understanding is finite and perspectival because of the holistic character of psychological and historical life.

Understanding can take on a self-reflective form and create unity out of multiplicity only in reference to the expressions and manifestations of life, yet such unity of reflection is not the unity of life. »Life« is not given in its immanent givenness, it is indeterminate in its determinacy, and »brought forth« and is therefore enacted and lived as historical. »Life« can only be indirectly addressed, intimated, and expressed through the movement of reflection between itself and the world, and is consequently »historical life«. Moving from and back toward itself without a predetermined or ultimate terminus, there is no adequate way for the self to isolate a subject or object as a substance or essence independent of the relational movement of experience and interpretation.

8. Conclusion

Dilthey did not respond to the reification and abstraction of modern epistemology by dismissing or excluding it.¹²² Instead of taking the »ontological turn«, Dilthey rethought epistemology in relation to its context historical life. The reason for this is that methodological and theoretical considerations cannot be avoided for the sake of a pure description or disclosure that would be able to explicate life from itself without the distance and mediation that reflection, theory, and methodology introduce. Distance, interval, and difference can occur at different levels of the constitution of meaning such that the community, ethical life, and tradition have their own facticity and lack of coherency and transparency. This facticity entails for Dilthey the need to both interpret and empirically investigate that characterizes the human sciences and, further, that the whole can only be glimpsed perspectively.

Historical understanding and interpretive reflection are formed and confronted, on the one hand, by the inherent pre-theoretical significance of historical life and, on the other, the interruption of significance in experiences of the intractable. There are experiences in which the ungroundability (*Unbegründbarkeit*) and unfathomability (*Unergründlichkeit*) that disturbs and threatens the establishment and organization of knowledge, validity, and value are glimpsed, and thought needs to return to the senses, imagination, and its own life-context – insofar as it can – in order to respond. This is not »irrational« but the very self-generation and articulation of rationality from life.

¹²² On Dilthey's transformation of epistemology, see Nelson: *Interpreting Practice: Epistemology, Hermeneutics, and Historical Life in Dilthey*, in: *Idealistic Studies*, 38:1-2 (2008), 105-122.