

## Chapter 2

# Wilhelm Dilthey and the Formative-Generative Imagination

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Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) is well-known as a philosopher and intellectual historian who prioritized the formative force and significance of the imagination in his popular and philosophical writings, such that he is accordingly identified as an heir to German Idealism and romanticism in a naturalistic and scientific epoch.<sup>1</sup> His works have been judged by subsequent hermeneutical thinkers, such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, as being ambiguously torn between a positivistic empiricism and an intuitive holistic romanticism (Gadamer 1985: 157–82). The position of the formative-generative imagination, the imagination as a constitutive structural element in the dynamic formation of the sense of a whole, in the development of Dilthey's thought clarifies this ostensive inconsistency. Dilthey repeatedly asserted that knowledge is intrinsically experiential and empirical. Forms of knowledge and science proceed from elementary experiences and logical operations, as Dilthey described in diverse ways from his early *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (*Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften: Versuch einer Grundlegung für das Studium der Gesellschaft und der Geschichte*, 1883) through his middle writings on psychology and aesthetics to his later *Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences* (*Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*, 1910).

Dilthey's philosophical works on the nature and limits of the human sciences, descriptive and analytic (interpretive) psychology, and hermeneutical and historical understanding gave the imagination a central systematic role in how subjects understand themselves and others in ordinary common life as well as in how individual and collective subjects—which have a relative and conditional identity and validity yet no substantial essence for Dilthey—are interpreted in human scientific formations. Dilthey's popular writings in intellectual and literary history, particularly his widely

read biographical sketches of eminent German poets in *Lived-Experience and Poetry* (*Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung*, 1907), depict and praise—to the point of exaggeration criticized by subsequent thinkers such as Adorno in his aesthetics—the heightened imaginative phantasy (*Phantasie*) and feeling of life (*Lebensgefühl*) expressed through the works of Lessing, Goethe, Novalis, and Hölderlin.<sup>2</sup>

While Dilthey emphasized the priority of experience, accordingly lending support to the claim that he can be categorized in a German tradition of empiricism, elementary experiences occur within contexts of signification that they presuppose and are enacted in a holistic nexus of differentiating structural relations.<sup>3</sup> In the same way as Dilthey's psychological works substituted the Kantian idea of an atemporal transcendental subjectivity with the differentiating development and enactment of a temporally mediated structural whole of the "acquired psychic nexus" (*erworbener seelischer Zusammenhang*), his analysis of the structural-contextual conditions of experience—that Dilthey construed as a transformation of Kant's static intellectualistic *a priori*—stressed the centrality of the imagination within the formation of experience itself and its elucidation.<sup>4</sup>

Dilthey's discourse of the imagination is most appropriately described in its own language as creative (*schaffende* or *schöpferische*) and formative-generative (*gestaltende*). This approach both modifies and presents an alternative to concepts of the productive and transcendental imagination that Dilthey interprets as overly idealistic in his historical portrayals of German Idealism and Romanticism.<sup>5</sup> Dilthey rarely explicitly mentioned the Kantian concept of the productive imagination (*produktive Einbildungskraft*) except in historical discussions of Kant and Fichte, as in his Schleiermacher biography (see Dilthey 1970a: 251; 1997b: 8). Elsewhere, in the manuscript of the "Basel Logic" of 1867–1868, Dilthey explicitly dismissed Fichte's foundationalist argumentation from the ego, including its use of the productive imagination, as erroneous and sophistical (Dilthey 1990: 74). Nonetheless, Dilthey's philosophy of the imagination can be interpreted as a posttranscendental appropriation and reinterpretation of the productive imagination that contextualizes it in relation to worldly receptivity and responsiveness as well as the structural wholes in which it operates. Dilthey's imagination is a related yet distinctive conception of the creativity of the imagination, which he at times describes in terms of a productive freely formative phantasy (*eine produktive freigestaltende Phantasie*).<sup>6</sup> The imagination reconfigures, within the context of its enactment, previously given elements and contents and completes them into new wholes of signification. A rethinking of the imagination and its "productivity" emerges across Dilthey's works in which the constitutive forces of the imagination are reinterpreted in formative-generative and dynamic structural-holistic terms.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe noted in his 1792 essay “The Experiment as a Mediator between Object and Subject” how “although arguments may deal with utterly separate matters, wit and imagination can group them around a single point to create a surprising semblance of right and wrong, true and false” (Goethe 1998: 16). Imagination completes cognition in forming a holistic intuitive perception (*Anschauung*) of the object. Dilthey adopts this interpretive strategy of the formative powers of the imagination that is more indebted to a critical reading of Goethe than to Kant. The imagination is depicted in *Lived-Experience and Poetry* as serving a generative role in human life and understanding as it provides—in structural interaction with perception (*Anschauung*) and memory (*Gedächtnis*)—a sense of the whole (Dilthey 1985: 238–40; 2005: 383–85). The imagination has a structural role in the formation of all experience; it shapes how human beings interpret themselves, intersubjectively given others, and the sense of nature itself in its occurrences and silence (Dilthey 1959a: 36).

As analyzed in this chapter, the imagination is not only an aesthetic concern limited to the creation of fictive entities and pictures in the mind’s eye. It does not only play a constitutive role in interpreting art and poetry, as Dilthey’s aesthetics is oriented toward disclosing the imaginative processes on both the side of the artist and the audience. The imagination is crucial to clarifying the elementary processes of understanding and interpretation in the midst of ordinary everyday human life, the paradigmatic thinking and radical epoch-changing transformations of thought evident in the natural sciences, and the modes of inquiry found in the historical and human sciences, both on the side of the researchers and the historical subjects who they research.

### **Dilthey, Transcendental Philosophy, and the Problem of Constitution**

To briefly outline Dilthey’s historical situation, the idea of the “productive imagination” as a transcendental condition that clarifies the possibility of *a priori* cognition and the imagination’s role in transcendental constitution were developed in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. The productivity of the imagination with respect to aesthetic and teleological forms of judgment was articulated in his *Critique of the Power of Judgement*.<sup>7</sup> The powerful systematic role given to the imagination in transcendental constitution by Kant inspired a generation of intellectuals, notably Fichte who identified it with spirit itself and conceived of it as completely creative in his 1794 lecture “Concerning the Difference between the Spirit and the Letter within Philosophy” (Fichte 1993: 193). It would be subsequently downplayed in postidealist German thought, including the neo-Kantian interpretations of Kant’s critical

philosophy that dominated late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German academic philosophy. Dilthey's thinking runs contrary to this tendency in retaining the centrality of the imagination albeit in a modified form. He expresses admiration for the emphasis on how mind and imagination are actively involved in shaping and producing the sense and meaningfulness of the world in transcendental philosophy and idealism while seeking to give spirit's activities a more empirical anthropological-psychological and social-historical basis in the human sciences.<sup>8</sup>

The first modification in the concept of the imagination that needs to be considered is Dilthey's relation with transcendental philosophy and idealism to which Dilthey is both an heir and critic. Dilthey's thinking was no doubt inspired and informed by Kant's philosophy of the imagination, as Rudolf Makkreel has emphasized in his Dilthey book (Makkreel 1992). Dilthey, however, sought to substantially revise—in a much more radical way than neo-Kantianism—the Kantian critical paradigm by rethinking precisely the *a priori* and transcendental elements in relation to the empirical natural (such as the biological and physiological study of human nature) and human sciences (encompassing psychology, anthropology, history, linguistics, etc.). As Dilthey argued in his early major work *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (1883), inquiry into the scope and limits of human knowledge and experience demands recourse to the empirical and ontic study of language, history, and culture in which they occur and are enacted (Dilthey 1957a: 180). Accordingly, Kant's "critique of pure reason" would become Dilthey's "critique of historical reason"—that is, the critique of reason as a historically embodied and practiced reality—and Kant's "categories of the understanding" would be reconsidered as the "categories of life" that are inseparable from and modified by how they are lived and enacted (Makkreel 1992: 244).

There is a distinctive element in Dilthey's postmetaphysical reconstruction of epistemology that prevents it from being empiricism as it is normally defined and that distinguishes his analysis from Hume's appeal to study the mind in common life, custom, and history. A philosophy of the synthetic *a priori* either leads to the dead-end of speculative idealism, which Dilthey sees as a movement whose time is past, or a situated and embodied historical *a priori* that requires empirical scientific inquiry and experiential self-reflection to be appropriately interpreted. Dilthey's reliance on and elucidation of dynamic structural wholes of relations that constitute a nexus (*Zusammenhang*) is both a transformation of and an alternative to classical transcendental philosophy and philosophical idealism that relies on constitution through the subject. There are now multiple forms of constitution of individuals, social forms of life, and forms of cognitively valid knowledge of human, organic, and physical relational wholes (*Zusammenhänge*) that are differentiated from one another through their own internal dynamics.<sup>9</sup> Dilthey's approach to individuation has been misconstrued by his critics: even while, for instance,

Dilthey's philosophical project has been criticized for his individualism in the developing field of sociology (Simmel, Weber), Marxist inspired philosophy (Lukács, Benjamin, Adorno), and in philosophical hermeneutics (Gadamer); individuality is interpreted as the individuation of a dynamic relational whole that, as such, contains nothing purely unique or singular independent of the relational nexus.<sup>10</sup>

How then does Dilthey conceive of constitution? Dilthey can speak of material, organic, psychological, and "spiritual" constitution and unfolded an account of the fundamentally practical constitution of the world in ways that prefigure and shares affinities with pragmatism.<sup>11</sup> Constitution (*Konstitution*) is not confined to theoretical or philosophical foundations in Dilthey's usage nor does it have a typically idealistic or transcendental character. To consider a few examples: Dilthey speaks of the constitution of psychic life from its own elements, forces, and laws—that parallel and are contentwise distinguished from those of physics or chemistry—in his psychological writings and the material-environmental and spiritual-social (*geistig*) constitution of a people—from which its conditions, needs, and ideals arise—in his writings on education (Dilthey 1960a: 56; 1997b: 253). In his posthumously published notes for the unpublished second volume of the *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, Dilthey distinguishes between logical, practical, and affective constitution of, respectively, knowledge, will, and emotional life (Dilthey 1997a: 79).

Dilthey more frequently deploys the word *Aufbau* than *Konstitution*. It can be translated into English as "constitution," "construction," or—more appropriately in Dilthey's case—as "formation." The term "Aufbau" occurs throughout Dilthey's works. He already uses the expression "formation of the human sciences" (*Aufbau der Geisteswissenschaften*) in the *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (Dilthey 1959a: 30). He articulates the idea of ethical life as an "Aufbau einer über das tierische Leben hinausreichenden" (a formation extending beyond animal life) in his *System of Ethics* and elsewhere the formation of worldviews, systematic sciences, and logic (Dilthey 1957b: 371; 1958b: 66; 1970b: 53). His primary late work *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences* clarifies how formation in this context is not purely logical and epistemic (Dilthey 1956; 2002). It is a social-historical formative-generative process involving the prereflective self-relational reflexivity and coming to self-reflection of humans investigating themselves. It is evident that transcendental conditions are reconceived as emergent structural relational wholes that are capable of further prereflectively made and self-conscious modifications such as through the freedom and conditional creativity and productivity of the imagination articulated in works of art, music, and poetry that are interpreted as expressions by audiences, art critics, and aesthetic theorists.

*Aufbau* as sociohistorical formation is not an achievement of an individual subject (whether understood as a lived or thinking ego) or collective subject

(which is only a heuristic fiction too easily reified) in Dilthey's analysis. The constitution of subjectivity is a structural process occurring through the mediations of history, language, and social-historical life. That is to say, as noted previously above, the subject is formed through intersecting conditions and forces of life: even its singular uniqueness and individuality—which Dilthey claims is an emergent absolute value—in his poetics, pedagogy, and ethics, is due to its being a unique individuating configuration or constellation of these conditions and forces rather than a self in the sense of an underlying soul or substance.<sup>12</sup> Dilthey describes in the *Aufbau* how the sense and identity of the self unfolds in experiential, imaginative, and interpretive relationships to itself in the context of its material-environmental and social-historical (which he calls “objective spirit” adopting Hegel's expression) mediations.

Another consequence of Dilthey's structuralism and expressivism—both of which have their roots in Herder and Goethe—is that he cannot be the proponent of direct or immediate introspective intuition as some scholars portray him; we interpret others and ourselves through mediations, objectifications, and expressions that allow the imagination to gain a sense of and interpret a person's subjectivity and interiority (i.e., the first-person perspective).<sup>13</sup> The uses of imagination and phantasy in Dilthey's broadly expressivist account of intersubjectivity do not lock the other out and imprison interpreters in their own first-person perspectives insofar as the imagination operates within an intersubjective nexus rather than produces it from out of itself. The imagination must necessarily work in interaction with others in forming a sense of the whole—that is, in this instance, the sense of their character and personal identity across time—which can be modified across each experience and encounter.

Dilthey's use of *Aufbau* should not be conflated with its deployment in other discourses, such as Rudolf Carnap's *The Logical Construction of the World* (*Der logische Aufbau der Welt*, 1928). *Aufbau* can be appropriately translated in Carnap's context as the construction of a system of constitution (*Konstitutionssystem*). There is a sense, however, in which Carnap's endeavor employs a “formation” echoing Dilthey (as well as others such as Husserl and Driesch) in that Carnap reconstructs in his 1928 work the formation of the experiential world through an analysis of holistically conceived lived experience (*Erlebnis*) in conjunction with the categories of the new formal logic adopted from Frege and Russell.<sup>14</sup>

### The Formative-Generative Role of the Imagination

Dilthey's conception of the imagination is not productive in the sense of positing an *a priori* condition of knowing or of creating a subject and a world.

As two dimensions of the same process, the productivity and creativity of the imagination are continuous with its worldly receptivity and responsiveness. Dilthey rejected the priority of the mind and any faculty thereof, in favor of interactive cogiveness (*Mitgegebenheit*), or equiprimordialness, arguing in “The Origin of Our Belief in the Reality of the External World and Its Justification” (“Beiträge zur Lösung der Frage vom Ursprung unseres Glaubens an die Realität der Außenwelt und ihrem Recht,” 1890) that self and world—as “being there for me”—are “given with” (*mitgegeben*) one another in a relational nexus that is initially prereflectively experienced through force and resistance.<sup>15</sup> The world is a reflexively felt practical reality rather than an external object that necessitates being cognitively inferred or demonstrated such that it is a metaphysical illusion to believe that there is a need to prove and reconstruct an external world in relation to a separate internal one: there is the differentiation and individuation of a holistic structure into the sense of a self as distinct from the world.

The creativity and responsivity—and these are two aspects of one process in Dilthey’s account—of the imagination operate in a worldly relational nexus of elements and conditions that it does not create but with which—in interaction and in the oscillating movement between whole and part, structure and event, general and particular—it generates and produces meaning in its relational context.

In a characteristic passage about the imaginative phantasy, which exposes Dilthey’s continuity and discontinuity with earlier idealist conceptions of the imagination, he describes in *Lived-Experience and Poetry* how poetic (aesthetic) phantasy receptively and creatively produces—in interaction with memory and perception that it modifies and transforms—“innumerable new intuitive forms” through “processes of intensification, diminution, arrangement, generalization, typification, formation, and transformation, which are sometimes unconscious and sometimes conscious and intentional” (Dilthey 1985, 241; 2005: 389). These imaginative processes, which creatively and concretely stylize and typify forms rather than abstractly universalize concepts, require the imagination to fuse and animate the “nucleus of the image” with new connections and relations through a process of “positive completion” (Dilthey 1985: 241; 2005: 389). Positive completion results in poetic images and forms that evoke reality while placing it in a different context that can illuminate it in new ways. Aesthetic phantasy, a thinking through images and forms that is a correlate to receptivity and responsiveness, thereby achieves a freedom in relation to its own contents to reconfigure them in meaningful ways. This sense of the imagination’s role in the formation of meaningful wholes in exemplary yet uniquely differentiated types, images, forms, and figures offers a clue to the function of the imagination as a whole.

As will be examined in further detail below, Dilthey distinguished varieties of the enactment of the imagination and phantasy. He introduces a distinction

between three forms of the imagination in his *Poetics*: the imagination as active in the formation of scientific hypotheses, practical moral-political ideals, and artistic images (Dilthey 1958a: 145–47; 1985, 75–77). Each form of the imagination is in this description active—and to this extent productive within a structural nexus—in the formation of coherent exemplary images and distinctive typical forms that transcend ordinary given reality in order to orient inquiry, action, and affective fulfillment. In Kantian language, the imagination provides a medium to pursue regulative ideas. But the imagination is not limited to a realm of orienting ideals. “Fixed forms of social life, festivity, and art,” according to Dilthey, disclose the function and prevalence of imagination in everyday human life (Dilthey 1958a: 147; 1985: 77). In all of these arenas of human life, the imagination is perceived as offering a sense of the whole that makes the social form, the popular festival, the work of art or music meaningful for me.

Showing an affinity with Hume, Mill, and associationist psychology on this point, the imagination is not productive in the sense of creating and producing new content or elements in Dilthey: the “new creation of contents (*Neuschöpfung von Inhalten*) . . . were nowhere experienced” (Dilthey 1958a: 142; see also Makkreel 1992: 163). Revealing his proximity to the empiricist tradition, and his commitment to the thesis of the primacy of experience, Dilthey maintained that imagination inherently operates from “out of elements of experience and based on analogies with experience” (Dilthey 1958a: 139; 1985: 68). Nonetheless, this affinity with British empiricism is itself limited, as the imagination is “free” in relation to the elements of experience and is not simply a form of reproductive association (Dilthey 1958a: 139; 1985: 68). Dilthey’s structural interpretation of the freedom and productivity of the imagination can well be portrayed as occupying a middle point between the empiricist account of imagination as a form of reproductive association and the idealist understanding of its *a priori* constitutive power. The imagination can be described as productive in another important sense in Dilthey: to the extent that it borrows, adopts, and creates meaning from an already existing nexus of life elements to form new meaningful types and wholes. The imagination is stylistically active within the conditions of its milieu in the formation of images, forms, and types. It can freely yet not limitlessly modify previously generated images and types or it can creatively form new images and types from previous elements and experiences.

The imagination is, furthermore, involved in the generative formation of world-pictures and worldviews through which individuals and collectives interpret the world and make it meaningful for themselves. Dilthey’s account of the formation of world-pictures echoes older ideas of the productive imagination in a modified structural and expansively naturalistic form. A world-picture (*Weltbild*) shapes the determination of value of life for itself, not as a

pregiven *a priori* reality or value but through the dynamic structural interaction of elements.<sup>16</sup> A world-picture offers an experiential sense of the whole. The sense of the whole exhibited in a world-picture is not a fixed or static determination. Dilthey describes how it is the enactment and expression of subjectivity in interaction with the world, as it is confronted by internal contradictions and external conflicts, including the “conflicts of world-pictures” (*Widerstreit der Weltbilder*) that cannot be conceptually resolved in favor of one particular world-picture or integrated in an ultimate unifying “final” synthesis.<sup>17</sup>

It is in this context that Dilthey, evoking Goethe’s imaginative experimentalism more than Kant’s philosophy of the imagination, calls on his readers to engage in experiments in imagination to creatively understand and interpret the human condition. While cognitive-conceptual thinking aiming at universal validity claims and “brings forth concepts,” the freedom of the imagination responsively, creatively, and reflectively “brings forth types” (1958a: 136). The imagination is accordingly productive within a relational-structural nexus in producing images, forms, and types through its receptivity to the world and its free creative interaction with it.

In what way then can the imagination be productive in the revised sense of being structurally formative-generative? The imagination is a capacity to reconfigure experience by recombining experiential elements into new relations (new types) of wholes and parts and the general and the particular (1958a 139; 1985: 118). The images, types, and forms of the formative-generative (*gestaltende*) imagination are constitutively productive of the expression and interpretation of expression. These relational wholes immanently emerge from within experience and give experience sense and meaning. Imagination is a constitutive—albeit socially and historically enacted and conditioned—dimension to all knowing in Dilthey’s epistemology.

### **Imagination, Lived-Experience, and Reconstructive Experience**

The imagination is a mediated yet not a derivative feature of human life and knowledge in Dilthey’s account. Dilthey is of course not the only philosopher who has argued that the imagination has a constitutive structural role in experience and its understanding. Dilthey’s work offers a unique and significant elucidation of the formative-generative force of how the imagination is operative—and productive in a conditional structural sense—in all forms of experiencing and knowing. As the relational sense of the whole, it is structurally operative in the formation of the most concrete sensations (which are more typically interpreted as preimaginative) and, as will be argued later in the discussion of

scientific imagination and phantasy, the most abstract and formal of concepts (which are more typically construed as transcending the imagination).

According to Dilthey's articulation of lived-experience (*Erlebnis*), which is the primary form of first-person experience from which objectively reproducible third-person experience (*Erfahrung*) is derived, imagination is presupposed in both *Erleben* (lived-experiencing) and how it is understood and interpreted in reconstructive experience (*Nach-Erleben*; literally, "after-experiencing") that inevitably occurs "afterward." This "after" is the interval in which understanding seeks to respond to and interpret the other. As the self cannot itself immediately live or "relive" (the popular translation of *Nacherleben* that misses its very point) the other's lived-experiencing, or even the self's own experience in an unmediated or noninterpretive intuitive manner, the encounters and relations between self and other presuppose the mediating role of the imagination in ordinary life, history, and poetry. The poet and the historian are depicted as understanding the lived-experience of the other through practices of re-creation and reconstruction that require the imagination for "completion" in gaining a sense of the other as an independent and autonomous whole—who is distinct from myself—with its own intrinsic first-person perspective and value as a person. Dilthey's use of the term *Nacherleben* indicates the acknowledgment and recognition of the internal first-person character of the other's lived-experiencing: that is, it is the reenactment of an experience that is not one's own at a distance, one that is spaced by difference itself, through processes of perception, memory, and imagination. *Nach-erleben*—which is one element of interpretive understanding (*Verstehen*)—can consequently be interpreted as a self-transformation of one's understanding toward the position of the other (Dilthey 1977: 66).

It should be stressed that the mere use of the imagination, imaginative empathy, and transposition cannot reveal the immediate concrete psychological or mental life of myself much less of others. One cannot rely purely on imagination to understand the life of others. Instead, rather, the imagination generates images, types, and forms through which we comprehend others and ourselves through what is generalizable (typical) and singular (atypical) rather than in and of itself. This interpretation runs counter to and corrects misinterpretations of Dilthey as a subjectivist relying on intuitive empathy that have missed the entire structural and morphological dimensions of Dilthey's philosophy that has been articulated particularly well in Frithjof Rodi's works on Dilthey (Rodi 2003). The emphasis on the structuring-structured whole is fairly clear from Dilthey's own writings. As a result, for instance, Dilthey describes the scope and limits of imaginative processes of reconstruction and completion in the following way in a passage worth quoting as a whole:

When I do not understand someone else, I cannot relive the state of the other in myself. Thus all understanding involves a re-creation in my psyche. Where is

this human capacity of re-creation to be located? Not in the capacity for abstract thought, but in an imaginative process. Scientific operations have their basis in the creative imagination [*schöpferische Phantasie*]. Imagination is an intuitive process in which I add to intuitive moments that are given some that are not. The intensity of the human imagination will differ. The power to complete what is given varies greatly in different people; even for the same person it will vary in different circumstances. The imagination is limited to a certain sphere. It is an illusion to think that nothing human is alien to me. Let us apply this to literature. The poetic capacity must contain a sympathy with everything human. This sympathy is also essential for the historian. Reconstruction is a moment in the poetic capacity. The greater the range of what he can re-create, the greater is the poet. (Dilthey 1990: 100; 1996: 229)

### **The Formative Role of the Imagination in Knowledge and Science**

Imagination and phantasy play a formative-generative role in understanding. As Makkreel has noted, emphasizing the Kantian character of the imagination in Dilthey's discourse, "Understanding is never just a matter of abstract thought. Instead, it requires the imagination to exhibit the universal in the particular, the whole in the part."<sup>18</sup> Dilthey's argumentation for the significance of the imagination and phantasy in understanding has a number of important consequences.

All understanding (*Verstehen*), even self-understanding, presupposes elementary and complex interpretive activities of understanding and consequently encompasses formative processes of the imagination that grasp how the universal is indicated in a particular and the whole is evident in the part. The imagination offers a sense of the whole not as an abstract universal concept but through particularity itself from elementary sensation, which requires a sense of a whole to be understood, to abstract concepts, which are likewise comprehensible through the work of the imagination. Dilthey's "formative-generative imagination," as a structurally modified form of the productive imagination, is practically and performatively enacted and lived in processes of understanding and interpretation within the midst of routinized ordinary everyday life, with all of the social forms it encompasses, and in the realm of complex theoretical and scientific knowledge.

Dilthey's discourse of the imagination is a step between the classic conception of the productive imagination and twentieth-century discourses of the imagination. He anticipated themes—evident in Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur—of twentieth-century phenomenology and hermeneutics in illuminating the affective and imaginative grounds of experience, understanding, and cognitive-conceptual knowledge. Dilthey was furthermore prescient of the historically informed anti-positivism of Thomas Kuhn and Paul

Feyerabend in repeatedly illustrating, in his underappreciated writings on the historical development of the modern sciences, the import of the imagination, affective life, and social-historical conditions in the formation and progress of the sciences, including the physical, organic, and human sciences. Even the most formalized theoretical knowledge and scientific theories practically presuppose the dynamic and interactive enactment and practice of the imagination that is capable of systematically integrating and differentiating (as two aspects of the same process) the whole and the part and the universal and the particular.

Dilthey's relationship with naturalism and his philosophy of the natural sciences are underappreciated facets of his complex philosophical project.<sup>19</sup> Dilthey's philosophy of science requires the recognition of the formative-generative character of the imagination. The sciences are not historically a result of a method of neutrally collecting facts, assessing purely given objectivities, and inductively inferring universal theories. Dilthey stresses how natural sciences such as physics and chemistry, as much as the human sciences, require the receptive and creative practice of the scientific imagination (*wissenschaftliche Einbildungskraft*) (Dilthey 1959a: 51) and scientific phantasy (*wissenschaftliche Phantasie*) (Dilthey, 1997b: 382).

Even in epochs that appear to be ones of ordinary nonrevolutionary science, to adopt Thomas Kuhn's distinction between normal and revolutionary paradigm-shifting science (Kuhn 2012), the sciences have not developed through the rigid following and mechanical application of predetermined rules. Normal scientific research relies, Dilthey contends, on an "art" (*Kunst*) of appropriately and at times creatively applying scientific rules and mediating empirical data and conceptual theories, as the imagination correlates the whole and the part and the universal and the particular in scientific knowing. Dilthey accordingly concludes (to return to a passage quoted in full at the conclusion of section 4), "Scientific operations have their basis in the creative phantasy [*schöperische Phantasie*]" and notes how this phantasy, which operates as a force of expansion and completion (*Kraft des Hinzuergänzens*), is limited (Dilthey 1985: 229; 1990: 100).

Akin to the artist, who shares an imaginative experimental sensibility, the scientist has a particular historically enacted and situated form of a cultivated and "disciplined" imagination that leads to the reproduction of previous results and at times revolutionary transformations (Dilthey 1958a: 185; 1985: 115). The poetic and scientific imagination are akin in that they both step beyond the bounds of empirical experience to encompass and elucidate experience in more fundamental ways in their artistic and theoretical works. The poetic imagination accomplishes this by heightening and transforming affects and feelings, while hypothesis formation is an imaginative and voluntary use of logic and existing scientific theories in creative

theorizing (Dilthey 1958a: 145; 1985: 75). Science is to this extent itself an art. The art of science, like all art (*Kunst*), presupposes the cultivation of an appropriate, in this case scientific and logical, imagination (Dilthey 1959b: 11, 174).

Science is one form of responsively and creatively grasping the natural world through the interaction of—structurally reconceived—the receptivity and productivity of the imagination, perception, and memory. Nature in Dilthey's thought is not directly given or immediately intuitively accessible. Nor is it a construct of pure imagination. The human understanding of nature is interpretively and social-historically conditioned and demands the use of imagination in its various scientific and artistic forms. It is in this sense that nature is “silent” and “foreign” to humans, as hermeneutical socially and historically mediated beings, and nature demands the employment of human imaginative powers to perceive it as meaningful (Dilthey 1959a: 36).

Dilthey maintained the systematic role of the productive—as meaning creative—imagination, arguing for the analogous operation of the imagination and phantasy of the poet, the philosopher, the politician, and the scientist (Dilthey 1958a: 185; 1985: 115). Further, imagination is part of the enactment of historically situated reason that operates through the formative and generative imagination and the orientation of the feeling of life in the context of social-historical conditions. Having established the significance of the imagination for reason, he analyzed the central role that art—as the sense of appropriateness and creative application—plays in human knowing as a practice.

### History and the Historical Imagination

History is another form of an art and practice that is concerned with the bond between the singular and the universal (Dilthey 1959a: 90–91; 1989: 140–41). It faces intrinsic limits in that it can only partially narrate and reflect on aspects of a complex fabric and vast totality, as it can recover fragments and remnants of a stratified, yet in significant ways, invisible past (Dilthey 1959a: 25; 1989: 76).

History is a science insofar as it deploys scientific-empirical means of studying the past through documents and statistics (Dilthey 1959a: 15; 1989: 77). The study of history is artistic since—like the arts—it demands the resourceful employment of the imagination and the ingenuity of the historian (Dilthey 1959a: 40; 1989: 91). Dilthey claimed in the *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, “History was an art for us because there, as in the imagination of the artist, the universal is intuited in the particular and is not yet separated from it by abstraction and expressed directly, which first occurs in theory”

(Dilthey 1959a: 40; 1989: 91; compare 1958a: 218; 1985: 218). The historian cannot proceed through historical materials and facticities solely through conceptual cognition, since “there is no understanding apart from a feeling of value,” and the enactment and artful practice of historical science “requires a feeling for the power of the unique and a sense for inner connections among ideas.”<sup>20</sup> The historical imagination does not intentionally create or produce new worlds; it creatively/responsively encompasses and illuminates historical worlds in their facticity.<sup>21</sup>

We find once again in the text that there is no sense of a whole—this time of a historical person, epoch, or form of life—without the participation of the imagination that brings individual facts together and makes them meaningful to the historian and the historian’s audience. A sense of a whole is a necessary yet potentially changing and moving point in the hermeneutical oscillation of understanding and interpretation that reconfigures that very whole. The process of understanding requires the interpreter participating in it by the activity of his or her own imagination. There are pathologies of the imagination in which one can be lost in imagery and phantasy. The historian can distort and misuse sources through the imaginative projection of a limited or distorting whole. However, without the imagination, as Dilthey critically wrote of the historian Schlosser in his early 1862 essay “Friedrich Christoph Schlosser and the Problem of Universal History,” one “does not do justice to the rich life of the spirit, not even to the forces that actually influence human political action” (Dilthey 1960c: 161; 1996: 321).

As Makkreel notes, Dilthey “treats the poetic imagination and the historical imagination, not merely as parallel, but as basically akin” (Makkreel 1992: 26). Let us now turn to this exemplary incarnation of the receptivity and creativity of the imagination.

### **The Poetic Imagination**

Adopting a thesis from Schleiermacher, Dilthey maintained that imagination and art characterize all knowing, even as the aim of knowledge is truth: “The production of an individual combination is art in the narrower sense, and its faculty is the imagination. In all knowing there is art and in all art there is knowing” (Dilthey 1996: 695). Whereas the imagination finds its proper scope in both scientific inquiry and artistic expression, the theoretical imagination exceeds its bounds when it becomes speculative or metaphysical and claims to cognitively comprehend the whole as a systematic totality (Dilthey 1959a: 359). It is in this sense that Dilthey’s project of a critique of historical reason is a transformation of epistemology and the question arises, “How

does a contingent and conditional subject relying on its affective, cognitive, and voluntary capacities, and faced with its dispersion and exteriority in the world, achieve ‘truth’?”

As art, history, religion, and the sciences themselves show, truths appear in conditional ways without an accessible ultimate foundational principle or criterion. Here again we see the extent to which Dilthey shares affinities with the empiricism and psychological concerns of Hume and Mill rather than German transcendentalism and Idealism.

As long noted in the reception of Dilthey, his poetic-aesthetic and psychological works are closely intertwined. His writings on poetry and poets focus on the imagination of the poet in relationship to contemporary “historical, psychological, and psycho-physical” inquiry in projects such as the systematic work *The Imagination of the Poet: Elements for a Poetics* (*Die Einbildungskraft des Dichters: Bausteine für eine Poetik*, 1887). In his 1886 lecture “Poetic Imagination and Madness” (“Dichterische Einbildungskraft und Wahnsinn”), he rejected the traditional identification between the poetic and madness, contrasting it with the healthy and balanced creativity of Goethe and Schiller. Dilthey differentiates in this lecture how the imagination includes, excludes, heightens, diminishes, and integrates the play of feelings: the artist engages in a “free play” of the forces and images of the imagination, forming and expressing a new work. Dilthey’s popular account of poets likewise focused on the imaginative process: for example, “Goethe and the Poetic Phantasy” (“Goethe und die dichterische Phantasie,” 1910), in which Goethe is interpreted as the exemplary modern example of the type of the healthy balanced creative imagination that can create exemplary lasting characters and types. The poet does not merely express life and the forces of life but receptively and productively reconfigures them into meaningful value-giving wholes that illuminate and orient that life (Dilthey 1985, 237–38; 2005, 382–83).

### Dilthey against Psychologism and Subjectivism

The close proximity between psychology and poetics in Dilthey’s aesthetic writings, in which psychology operates as a foundational human science for other human sciences such as aesthetics, has led critics such as Adorno, particularly based on Dilthey’s popular aesthetic writings, to argue that Dilthey conflated the image in the work of art with the psychological image in the mind of the artist. Dilthey’s aesthetics is often portrayed as a continuation of Romanticism in life-philosophical form that—due to the emphasis on feeling, imagination, phantasy, and the free responsiveness of the self—is

incompatible with the social critical realism and naturalism that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century. Theodor Adorno argues against Diltheyian aesthetics in his *Aesthetic Theory*:

Aesthetic images are not fixed, archaic invariants: Artworks become images in that the processes that have congealed in them as objectivity become eloquent. Bourgeois art-religion of Diltheyian provenance confuses the imagery of art with its opposite: with the artist's psychological repository of representations. But this repository is itself an element of the raw material forged into the artwork. (Adorno 2014: 118)

Already in Dilthey's *Poetics*, which posits the poetic imagination as the point of departure for poetics, Dilthey describes how this imagination is subject to its own structural conditions: "The poet's imagination is historically conditioned, not only in its material, but also in its technique" (Dilthey 1958a: 127; 1985: 54). *The Three Epochs of Modern Aesthetics and Its Present Task* (*Die drei Epochen der modernen Aesthetik und ihre heutige Aufgabe*, 1892) further indicates how problematic Adorno's assessment is even within aesthetics. Dilthey articulated the character and scope of the human science of aesthetics as an exemplary science of such structural relations. In this context, aesthetic imagination, in a limited sense, is defined as the capacity for artistic production and the capacity to re-create the other's (the artist's) lived experience through the exteriority of its expression.

Dilthey rejected "aestheticism," "art for art's sake," as it separated beauty from historically embodied lived experience.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, poetry and art provide the most vivid and poignant insights of life and expression. They are closest to and most expressive of the self-presentation of life in its textures, fullness, and complexity (Dilthey 1960b: 26).

Artistic works do not merely express the psychological intention or subjective interiority of the artist as Adorno inaccurately contends against Dilthey. They are dynamic structural relational wholes, in which the imagination plays a role: it can, within the possibilities and limits of its social-historical world, heighten and intensify life and disclose further possibilities that are invisible and unheeded in ordinary conventional life. The writer can challenge the existing order or bring its injustices into question as Dilthey notes of the idealist poet of freedom Schiller to later naturalistic writers, such as Charles Dickens, in his own time. Although literary naturalism preferred to present itself as an empirical scientific description of the facts of the world, Dilthey recognizes how naturalistic authors employ the imagination to productively stylize and typify experiences and the world. Whether it is Schiller or Dickens, the literary author can receptively encounter and trace phenomena in order to creatively modify, enliven, and complete an image from the elements given by the world (Dilthey 1958a, 212–13; 1985: 142–43). Art is the

strongest expression of the freedom and productivity of the imagination, as it can address and encounter the singular without destroying it in a noncoercive juxtaposition of singulars such that art is higher than any science.<sup>23</sup>

Aesthetics serves as an exemplary model for the human sciences. Dilthey clarifies why aesthetics is a model human science in *The Imagination of the Poet: Elements for a Poetics*:

The poetic formative process, its psychological structure, and its historical variability can be studied especially well. The hope arises that the role of psychological processes in historical products will be explained in detail through poetics. Our philosophical conception of history was developed from literary history. Perhaps poetics will have a similar significance for the systematic study of historical expressions of life. (Dilthey 1958a: 109; 1985: 36)

Dilthey's writings on poetics indicate how idealist and romantic conceptions of the creative and productive imagination of artists and artistic genius can be redescribed through the experientially descriptive and structural-relational analytic psychology of the imagination. It is an example of the imagination in general, as it varies psychological, logical, and other structures rather than being different in kind. Nonetheless, despite this scientific psychological dimension, this is not a reductive naturalistic approach to artistic imagination. It is a phenomenologically descriptive and structurally analytic psychology rather than purely causal-explanatory, that is to say, a psychology appropriate to social-historical individuals and the use of types, norms, and intentions that require the work and freedom of the imagination in their formulation and application.<sup>24</sup> Dilthey's works can still be appreciated for how they intertwine the structural study of the creative and productive powers of the imagination—and its cultivation through forms, rules, and techniques—with the intimacy of biographically understanding the hermeneutical situation and life of the artist.<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusion

Stanley Corngold has portrayed Dilthey's approach as unfolding a poetics of force and forces (Corngold 1981: 301–37). The forces and conditions of life play no doubt a crucial role, as do their intensification and diminishment, exclusion and inclusion. But Dilthey is clear that the factual forces of life by themselves lead to an impoverished poetics. The poet leaps beyond and ahead of the forces and conditions of life as a seer and visionary of humanity (*Seher der Menschheit*, which is used in the title of the unfinished planned work from 1895 eventually published as Dilthey 2006). The poet interpretively integrates and creatively reimagines social-historical forces and conditions,

both real and unreal, painful and joyous. The poet can receptively and productively reconfigure elements into new meaningful relational wholes. In this sense, there is an analogy between poetry and pedagogy, as the education of the forces of life. A poetics of self-formation in self-cultivation and educational formation (*Bildung*) is developed in Dilthey's *Pedagogy* (Dilthey 1960a). There is in this context a significant connection between *Bildung* and *Einbildung* that clarifies the vital yet conditional role of the imagination in life and in its cultivation.

Dilthey established the systematic exemplary role that aesthetics and poetics play in articulating the character, scope, and boundaries of the human sciences (see Makkreel 1992: 15, 78). As we have seen, the imagination is neither limited to the aesthetics of nature and artworks nor to a merely subjective realm. It is structurally crucial to understanding the modes of inquiry found in history and the human sciences, the rethinking of paradigms and radical epoch-changing transformations of thought evident in the historical development of the natural sciences, and the elementary processes of understanding and interpreting others in ordinary mundane human life.

Recognizing the significance of the formative-generative imagination—as a transformation of and an alternative to classic transcendental and idealist theories of the productive imagination—for an adequate conception and appropriate employment of reason, Dilthey critically situated reason in relation to the imagination, which forms its very freedom and creativity beyond the repetition of concepts and rules, and explored how rationality is oriented by the feeling of life, and its extension and heightening through the imagination, in the nexus of its social-historical conditions. As argued in this chapter, Dilthey articulated the theoretical significance of imaginative experience and the primary role of the receptive/creative processes of the imagination in the construction/formation of the world. His exploration of the varying incarnations of the imagination—in its receptivity and productivity and in a structural-relational nexus—indicates its formative-generative form.

## Notes

1. Rudolf Makkreel in particular has emphasized the key role of the imagination in Dilthey's thought in Makkreel (1992).

2. Dilthey's most popular work *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung* went through a number of editions and is now available in Dilthey (2005). Adorno mentions the problematic character of Dilthey's use of language, for instance, in his lecture course on aesthetics without adequately distinguishing Dilthey's popular and philosophical writings in Adorno (2009: 33, 334–35). On Dilthey's conception of the feeling of life, see Makkreel (1985: 83–104) and Nelson (2014: 263–87).

3. On Dilthey's relation to empiricism, see Dambock (2016) and Nelson (2007b: 108–28). On Dilthey's conception of structurally differentiated wholes, see Rodi (2003) and Rodi (2016: 51–69).

4. On the notion of the “acquired psychic nexus,” see Dilthey (1957: 217).

5. This approach unfolded here is informed in part by the interpretation of generativity in Dilthey in Makkreel (2011: 17–31).

6. Dilthey applies this expression to Shakespeare's tragedies in Dilthey (2006: 45), where he emphasizes how the free productive-formative activity of phantasy relies on an established context of contents, materials, and memory.

7. For a fuller account of the imagination in Kant, see Makkreel (1990).

8. Compare Makkreel and Rodi, Introduction to Dilthey (1985: 14). In addition, it should be noted how Dilthey's discourse of the imagination serves as a bridge between earlier and twentieth-century conceptions of the imagination in German philosophy, including Heidegger's interpretation of Kantian imagination (compare Schalow 2016: 377–94).

9. On Dilthey's structural holism, see in particular Rodi (2003) and Rodi (2016: 51–69).

10. This important yet neglected point is carefully developed in Marom (2014: 1–13). Dilthey's oft-cited statement from the Schleiermacher biography that the “individual is ineffable” (Dilthey 1970: 1; 1996: 249) indicates the complexity of this relational whole rather than an unknowable substance.

11. I argue for the priority of practice and practical constitution, see Nelson (2008: 105–22). On Dilthey and pragmatism concerning the interconnection of knowledge and practical interests, see Habermas (1986).

12. Note again the analysis in Marom (2014: 1–13).

13. On Dilthey's indebtedness to the German expressivist transmission, see Forster (2010: 107–9) and Forster (2011: 195).

14. See Carnap (1998). For an historical analysis of Dilthey's significance for Carnap, and their different conceptions of *Aufbau*, see Nelson (2017).

15. See Dilthey (1957: 90–138) and Dilthey (2010: 8–57). Dilthey describes how the sense of self and world are reflexively interwoven: “The root of self-consciousness, self-feeling, is primitively co-given with consciousness of the world” (Dilthey 1997a: 171; 1989: 350).

16. On this point, compare Horowitz (1989: 28–29).

17. Concerning Dilthey's conception of world-picture and the conflict of world-views, in contrast to the idea of world in Husserl and Heidegger, see Nelson (2015: 378–89).

18. See Makkreel and Rodi, Introduction to Dilthey (1996: 12).

19. On Dilthey's interpretation of nature and relationship with naturalism, see Nelson (2013: 141–60).

20. See Dilthey (1957: 336), Dilthey (1996: 255), Dilthey (1966: 638), and Dilthey (1996: 77). On the distinction between cognition and knowledge in Dilthey, see Makkreel (2003, 149–64).

21. Dilthey describes this in the following terms: “die geschichtliche Einbildungskraft . . . die ganze geschichtliche Welt in ihrer Tatsächlichkeit zu umfassen” (Dilthey 1970b: 281).

22. Note the argument developed against the critique of Dilthey's ostensive aestheticism in Nelson (2007a: 121–42).

23. See Dilthey (1960b: 26–27). Concerning the exemplary character of aesthetics for the human sciences in Dilthey, compare the analysis in Makkreel (1986: 73–85).

24. On psychology as an interpretive human science, see Nelson (2010: 19–44) and Nelson (2014: 263–87).

25. “Zu dem Literarhistoriker tritt der Ästhetiker, und auch er macht seine Ansprüche auf diese Handschriften geltend. Er möchte die Natur der Einbildungskraft, ihre Formen, die Regeln des Schaffens und die Entwicklung der Technik erkennen. Das erfordert den intimsten Einblick in das Leben des Dichters: er muß bei ihm in seiner Werkstatt sitzen” (Dilthey 1970b: 6).

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