

**Wilhelm Dilthey: Selected Works, Volume II:
Understanding the Human World. Edited
with Introduction by Rudolf A. Makkreel
and Frithjof Rodi**

Princeton University Press, 2010, 284 pp + index

Eric S. Nelson

Published online: 11 October 2011
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2011

Understanding the Human World is a welcome collection of Dilthey's key philosophical and psychological writings from the 1890s, a highly productive and controversial period in the development of his thought. Dilthey's endeavors to give both naturalistic and humanistic strategies their due regard and reconceive epistemology through the methods and data of the sciences, particularly history and psychology, led to the negative reaction of both positivists and idealists. No aspect of his thought was more provocative than his advocacy of a descriptive and analytic psychology as a "human science" (*Geisteswissenschaft*), which was opposed by those who considered psychology an exclusively naturalistic experimental science, including pioneering experimental psychologists such as Ebbinghaus and Wundt who pursued reductionist programs. Dilthey's critics also included Neo-Kantian philosophers, in particular Windelband and Rickert, who protected the distinctiveness of the "cultural sciences," as sciences of the individual person and ideal values, from naturalism by abandoning psychology to the universalizing hypothetical-causal explanations of the natural sciences.¹

These early debates continue to haunt later reflections on the possibility of a humanistic or interpretive psychology. Dilthey's contributions to these philosophical and psychological disputes over the actuality of the self and its experiences of the world are worth reconsidering for their historical significance, and—given the increasing albeit still too limited appreciation for the social, historical, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions of psychological inquiry—because we are perhaps in a better position today to recognize the continuing relevance of Dilthey's contextualizing epistemology and individual-oriented interpretive psychology.

¹ On Dilthey's articulation of an interpretive psychology, see Eric S. Nelson, "Impure Phenomenology: Dilthey, Epistemology, and the Task of Interpretive Psychology." *Studia Phaenomenologica*, vol. 10, 2010: 19–44.

E. S. Nelson (✉)
Department of Philosophy, University of Massachusetts, Lowell, MA, USA
e-mail: esnels@gmail.com

The volume's initial short pieces offer a context for Dilthey's writings concerning the self and the formation of its sense of reality and its individuality. Dilthey proposes in his "Draft for a Preface" (1911) that the dominant positivist model of the natural sciences has "truncated the spiritual-cultural world" (p. 2). The historical world is not a mere folk-illusion. It is functionally real, and the primary enactment and expression of human life inevitably presupposed by the reductive naturalist. This practical life-context allows the human scientist to recognize the individual self and its productive creative relations with the whole. Despite positivism's limitations and dogmatic overextension, Dilthey articulates knowledge's empirical character while criticizing positivism's speculative opponents, "who tore thought away from sense-perception." Dilthey's alternative is to "understand life on its own terms," immanently from out of itself, and bring it to reflective cognition and validity about itself (p. 2). Positivism and Kantian inspired critical empiricism are correct to stress experience and its limits, as the conditions and contexts of life cannot be transcended. But—rectifying their problematic intellectual representationalism—life is not merely a phenomenal appearance for consciousness. Life is a productive nexus forming value for itself. This life is not immediately or intuitively given to itself, it is reflexively aware (*Innewerden*) such that it must be understood and interpreted through its expressions, objectifications, and practices. There is no knowledge of a world independent of perception and lived-experience, which ground consciousness and science.

In his "Inaugural Speech" (1887), Dilthey highlights the Leibnizian inspiration of a philosophical faith in the living unity and embodiment of the sciences. The individual remains invisible to perception without lived-experience, and yet is the greatest historical actuality that allows reality to be experienced from within in its most extensive fullness. Dilthey emphasizes the transition from a metaphysical grounding to the practical context of the sciences, where sense and coherence reside immanently within experience and the life-nexus rather than being imposed by an external system. It is in history and biography, art and literature that the historically and psychologically actual individual is most concretely expressed and accordingly to be understood.

In the context of articulating and justifying ordinary and human scientific communicative understanding, Dilthey reinterprets epistemology as having a social, psychological, and biological dimension that cannot be eliminated without distorting the very activities, processes, and tasks of cognitive knowledge (*Erkenntnis*). Dilthey thus challenges metaphysical and scientific formalisms that interpret knowledge to consist of worldless validity and value claims. The very sense of actuality is not a product of intellectual positing; it is shaped by the interaction of cognition with feeling, instincts, and volitions that develop as a complex whole in a person through experiences of resistance, limitation, and restraint. "The Origin of Our Belief in the Reality of the External World and Its Justification" (1890) demonstrates how reality is neither a representationally constructed phenomenal object nor immediately given in intuition or inner experience. Reality as "there for me" is exhibited as immediate in consciousness through reflexive awareness (*Innewerden*). This apparent immediacy is mediated through biological drives, environmental adaptations, and practical interests formed

through the play and work of impulse and resistance. Our sense of reality presupposes the elemental interaction and mediation of self and world prior to their differentiation; reality is irreducible to a worldless subject or an unperceived and non-given object, to pure consciousness or materiality, much less to their metaphysically reified manifestation as idealism and materialism.

Dilthey's "Life and Cognition" (1892–1893) depicts how life is only categorially or interpretively given "as" the connectedness and particularity of an individual life. Life occurs through basic "categories of life"—selfsameness, doing and undergoing, and essentiality—which are interestingly elaborated in Makkreel's introduction. These real categories are only possible as performatively enacted in lived-experience and in the interpretive practical formation of the human world. Dilthey's project is to a great degree "naturalizing" except that it simultaneously "critically" traces the limits of naturalistic scientific methods in the face of the reflexivity of the subject (*Innewerden*), the singularity of the individual's life, and the inability of humans to know and comprehend life as a comprehensive universally valid systematic whole. Dilthey naturalistically critiques claims supporting a non-interpreted immediate givenness and the direct self-access and self-evidence of "inner experience" (*Erlebnis*) that lead to metaphysical and theological claims about reality as a totality. Dilthey critically—if minimalistically due to his reinterpretation of transcendental categories as conditional life-categories—confronts naturalism with the reflexively and interpretively processed and mediated character of the given and the factual that cannot, because of the integrated holism that characterizes experiences and makes them possible, be coherently and adequately reduced to or reconstructed as discrete "natural" atomistic elements abstracted from the complex life-nexus.

"The Ideas for a Descriptive and Analytic Psychology" (1894) is Dilthey's most controversial work, raising the ire of both positivistic psychology (Ebbinghaus and Wundt) and philosophers committed to a transcendental realm of validity and value claims (Rickert and early Husserl). Dilthey articulates—through a complex and nuanced reading of the psychological literature of his times—the possibility of a descriptive and analytic (that is, an interpretive) psychology. Dilthey does not argue for an opposition of methods—understanding and explanation—and a duality of sciences—natural and human—as simplistic depictions of Dilthey's thinking incorrectly claim. Dilthey employs causal explanation and interpretive understanding in his psychology as well as functional and structural explanatory strategies.

Given the mediation involved in concrete individual life, psychology cannot be appropriately understood as a subjective self-intuition and introspection. This approach denies the facticity of life and mind, as mediated phenomena demanding interpretation, and undermines psychology's scientific—i.e., intersubjective and universalizing—task. Nor can psychology be adequate to its task of illuminating individual human life if it is the collecting of discrete data—abstracted from and dissolving the life-nexus of individual and social life—that are then externally reconstructed and organized through causal hypotheses. Objectifying third-person methods are useful in every science but should be contextualized in a human-oriented psychology that recognizes the conditional, negotiated, and fragile unity and identity of the individual person and the person's interpretive, mediated, and

self-reflexive life. Because of the multifaceted mediation of the “acquired psychic nexus,” psychology cannot be merely descriptive but must also be analytic, comparative, and structural. Structural psychology reveals the temporal enactment of the categories of life in lived-experience and provides additional support for his reinterpretation of epistemology and the human sciences in contrast with tendencies that exclude empirical psychology from these roles.

Dilthey did not abandon this psychological program even as it became more deeply hermeneutical in his later works. “Contributions to the Study of Individuality” (1895–1896) further articulates the comparative-morphological strategy of elucidating individuality in its relational contexts. Through the hermeneutical oscillation between singular and whole, both are further elucidated. Dilthey rejects the Neo-Kantian paradigm of the ideographic character of the cultural sciences developed by Windelband. Dilthey correctly illustrates how natural sciences such as astronomy include an ideographic dimension and how the human sciences presuppose and propose generalizing and systematizing claims that allow the historical nexus to be interpreted through the typical and the singular. It is in this natural-historical context that the actual and not merely ideal individual can be recognized and respected. This conditional and situated yet still meaningful and purposive individual person is the basic point of departure and task for the human sciences and of Dilthey’s hermeneutical justification of methodological individualism against the collectivist tendencies dominant in German social theory. Although all sciences are expressions of life, which cannot escape life’s conditions, the human sciences are immanently constituted in intersubjective relations by practical and ultimately ethical and social-political interests in a way that distinguishes them from the natural sciences that rest more secularly in the objectified world.