**Inner experience and articulation. Wilhelm Dilthey’s foundational project and the charge of psychologism.**

**Introduction**

Wilhelm Dilthey has often been criticized for his alleged psychologism, historicism, skepticism and relativism. This line of criticism was developed already during his lifetime. For example, Wilhelm Windelband mentioned the critique of historical reason in the context of a discussion of the “relativist” implications of the “genetic method“ in philosophy (Windelband 1883/1924). His student Heinrich Rickert launched a more direct attack on Dilthey’s descriptive psychology, criticizing his “psychologistic” approach to history (Rickert 1921). Some years later, Edmund Husserl published a hostile rejection of Dilthey’s theory of worldviews, in which he accused Dilthey of “historicism” and “extreme skeptic subjectivism” (Husserl 1911/2009). And Ernst Troeltsch criticized Dilthey’s account of historical knowledge for its “psychologism”, “irrationalism” and “positivist relativism” (Troeltsch 1922/2008).

The question of Dilthey’s psychologism and historicism still generates controversy. Some interpreters follow his contemporaries’ negative assessment. They argue that Dilthey failed to solve the antinomies of historicism, or that he misconstrued the transcendental approach in a psychologistic fashion (Bambach 1995; Gadamer 1960; Ineichen 1975, 2003). Others seek to exonerate Dilthey from the charges at least partly, arguing for example that his theory of elementary logical operations avoids psychologism, or that his epistemological approach prevents history from sliding into historicist relativism (Ermarth 1978, 352; Makkreel 1992, 53—55, 287—288).[[1]](#footnote-1) The issue of psychologism is also implicitly at stake in current debates on Dilthey’s position towards empiricism, and his methodological holism (Damböck 2017; Lessing 2016; Patton, 2015).

In this paper, I reconstruct Dilthey’s descriptive psychology as developed from the early 1880s to the mid 1890s, and the charges of psychologism that were levelled against it. The paper has two goals. The first goal is to give a fine-grained, systematic reconstruction that distills a consistent foundational project from Dilthey’s intricate and often unsystematic reflections on the relationship between psychology and the human sciences.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Dilthey repeatedly claims that the human sciences are founded on inner experience. In *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, he states that “the independent constitution of the human sciences” depends on the identification of “processes that concern a range of facts which are given originally in inner experience” (Dilthey 1883/1989, 60-61). He continues to uphold the centrality of inner experience at least until 1895/96, when in *Über vergleichende Psychologie* he writes that “knowledge of the human spirit is directly or indirectly grounded in inner experience.“ (Dilthey 1895-96/2010, 223). Taking these and similar statements at face value, I seek to recover the philosophical resources which allow Dilthey to ground the knowledge claims of the human sciences in inner experience. On my interpretation, the central thought of this project can be captured as follows: valid knowledge in the human sciences is possible because

1. valid descriptions of inner experience are possible, and
2. the socio-historical world is epistemically accessible from the standpoint of inner experience.

As I will show, Dilthey’s attempts to make (1) and (2) plausible hinge on a psychological account of the “articulation” of the living “psychic nexus”.

My second goal is to assess the “psychologistic” aspects of Dilthey’s foundational project. Both Dilthey’s critics and his defenders often presuppose a narrow conception of psychologism, according to which psychologism consist in reducing meaning phenomena to psychological states, such that understanding an utterance or work consists in re-creating the author’s psychological states. At Dilthey’s life-time, however, this was not the predominant understanding of what psychologism amounts to. A broader spectrum of definitions and accounts was available. I reconstruct how Dilthey’s critics Husserl, Windelband and Rickert understood psychologism, highlight commonalities between them and explain why Dilthey’s approach seemed psychologistic from their perspective. I argue, however, that this should not lead us to reject his account, since Dilthey’s psychologism played a productive rather than destructive role in his foundational project.

The paper has five parts. In the first part I reconstruct Dilthey’s views on the foundational role of psychology and his rationale for claim (1) outlined above. In the second part, I investigate Dilthey’s ideas about the relation between individual psychology and the socio-historical world and reconstruct his arguments for (2). In the third part, I present the psychologism charges that were formulated by Dilthey’s contemporaries, and assess Dilthey’s foundational project in light of these criticisms. In the fifth and final part, I conclude with some reflections on the continuities between Dilthey’s descriptive psychology and his hermeneutic theory.

**1. Valid descriptions of inner experience**

In *Einleitung*, Dilthey declares psychology to be the „first and most fundamental of the particular human sciences. Accordingly, its truths constitute the basis of the further formation of the human sciences“ (Dilthey 1883/1989, 84). As a “basic science” (Dilthey, 1895-96/2010, 241) psychology is supposed to ground disciplines as diverse as history, jurisprudence, economics, political theory, theology, literary theory and aesthetics. Dilthey gives two different reasons for why psychology is a foundational, basic science. One reason is methodological, the other epistemological.

First, psychology deals with the life-units or psycho-physical individuals that are the basic elements “from which society and history are formed“ (Dilthey 1883/1989, 80). Studying these psycho-physical life-units, psychology provides the most basic concepts of the human sciences. And yet, Dilthey also notes that the individual is not an isolated and fixed element. Rather, it is shaped by society and history. Therefore, individual psychology remains an abstraction. In order to overcome its abstractness, psychology has to provide an account of the individual as inherently social and historical (Dilthey 1883/1989, 30-32). To achieve this task, it has to cooperate with other human sciences. Methodologically, psychology does not come first in the research process and its foundational status – as a science of the basic elements of society – is precarious from the beginning. This has led some interpreters to present Dilthey as a methodological holist who does not attribute a privileged role to any specific discipline (Lessing 2016*;* Patton 2015).[[3]](#footnote-3)

But Dilthey’s philosophical aspirations go beyond methodological reflections. His project of the 1880s and 1890s is best described as an “epistemology of the human sciences” – that is as a theory of the conditions for valid knowledge in the human sciences. While some interpreters deem Dilthey’s philosophy averse to the project of identifying conditions for valid knowledge and instead emphasize his philosophy of life, or his pragmatic orientation (Jung 1996; Owensby 1994), my own interpretation sides with those who do see Dilthey as committed to the search for an epistemological foundation of the human sciences (Damböck 2017; Feest 2007; Ineichen 1975*;* Makkreel 1992). And on my reading, Dilthey’s remarks about the privileged status of psychology are best understood not as expressing a methodological thesis. Rather they express a thesis about psychology being central for explicating the conditions of valid knowledge – of valid knowledge in general, and of valid knowledge in the human sciences in particular.[[4]](#footnote-4) As stated above, on my interpretation, the central thought of Dilthey’s epistemology of the human sciences can be captured as follows:

Valid and objective knowledge in the human sciences is possible because

1. valid descriptions of inner experience are possible, and
2. the socio-historical world is epistemically accessible from the standpoint of inner experience.

Put differently, the capacity of the human sciences to represent the socio-historical world objectively is rooted in our capacity to form valid representations of this world as it is disclosed in inner experience.

In this section I focus on Dilthey’s account of (1). To lay the ground, I will first recapitulate Dilthey’s stance on the relation between psychology and epistemology in general. I then present Dilthey’s concept of inner experience and explain why he thinks that inner experience can provide the human sciences with a solid foundation. On this basis I then proceed to a reconstruction of how, according to Dilthey, valid descriptions of inner experience are possible.

I begin with Dilthey’s views on the relevance of psychology to epistemology in general. Although Dilthey famously described his own project as a “critique of historical reason” (Dilthey 1883/1989, 165), his epistemological approach in many ways opposes the perceived dualisms of Kantian criticism. Dilthey questions the distinctions between intuition and understanding, between theoretical and practical philosophy, and between the transcendental and the empirical. In *Breslauer Ausarbeitung*, he formulates an explicit critique of transcendental epistemology. His starting point is the “principle of phenomenality” according to which everything that is given to us is given to us as a “fact of consciousness” (Dilthey 1880-1890/1989a, 245-247). Dilthey observes that the facts of consciousness are always given to us as interconnected. But according to Dilthey, this primary connectedness is established not by a transcendental subject, but rather by a living totality that is itself given in experience. Dilthey thinks that this living totality is a psychological entity:

“[T]he nexus that encompasses the facts of consciousness – including perceptions, memories, objects and representations of them, finally concepts – is psychological, i.e., it is contained in the totality of psychic life” (Dilthey 1880-1890/1989a, 263-264).

Dilthey also refers to this totality as the “psychic nexus” (*Zusammenhang des Seelenlebens*), and I will return to this concept in more detail below. Here it suffices to note that Dilthey thinks of the capacities of the intellect and the conditions for valid knowledge are also part of this richer totality of the psychic nexus. This is why he thinks that the conditions for knowledge can only be determined by a psychological investigation (Dilthey 1880-1890/1989a, 267-268; 1894/2010, 126). Because the intellect cannot be detached from the forces of life, “epistemology is psychology in motion” (Dilthey 1894/2010, 127).[[5]](#footnote-5)

But for Dilthey, psychology is not just indispensable for epistemological analysis in general. It is also central for the epistemology of the human sciences in particular. In this context, Dilthey repeatedly stresses the importance of what he calls “inner experience” (*innere Erfahrung*) for the foundation of the human sciences. I will now clarify this concept and explain why Dilthey deems it relevant for the foundation of the human sciences.

Dilthey in fact has two notions of inner experience, a narrow and a broad one, although he does not distinguish them explicitly. In the narrow sense, inner experience is experience that is not brought about by the senses and is not representational. While outer experience is characterized by “representation” (*Vorstellung*) in which an external content is distinguished from the knowing subject, inner experience is constituted by “reflexive awareness” (*Innewerden*)[[6]](#footnote-6) in which act and content are one (Dilthey 1880-1890/1989a, 253—254). Inner experience is non-representational and for Dilthey, this means it is also non-phenomenal: when I am experiencing my feelings, wishes and purposes, I am experiencing the thing itself. Since according to the principle of phenomenality, everything that is given to us is given to us as a fact of consciousness, it follows that there are two basic classes of facts of consciousness, those given in outer and those given in inner experience (narrow).

But as stated above, Dilthey also emphasizes that the facts of consciousness are given to us in a primary state of connectedness. Inner and outer experience are always interwoven, and they form a living totality, the “psychic nexus”. On the broader construal of the term – inner experience contains outer experience as part of this nexus. Dilthey reasons that every act of outer perception can be accompanied by a reflexive awareness of that act (Dilthey 1880-1890/1989a, 256-258). And while in outer perception an external object is separated from the knowing subject, the act of perception itself is present to me in inner experience. “Everything that appears in consciousness as its modification can … be apprehended in inner perception.” (Dilthey 1880-1890/1989a, 375). Moreover, the connectedness between the facts of consciousness can itself be apprehended in inner experience. Put differently, inner experience (broad) provides us with access to the synthesizing function of consciousness. Hence, inner experience (broad) is experience as it discloses itself from within the living totality of psychic life. It is the experience that we have of the nexus that connects outer and inner experience (narrow).[[7]](#footnote-7)

Dilthey thinks that inner experience (broad) shares the features of inner experience (narrow): it is non-representational and non-phenomenal, a “basic given” (Dilthey 1894/2010, 119) that “provides immediate certainty“ (Dilthey 1880-1890/1989a, 271). This is also why Dilthey deems inner experience (broad) central for providing the human sciences with a solid foundation. He makes a contrast between the facts of the natural sciences that are given from the outside, as phenomena, and the objects of the human sciences, which are “given *originaliter* from within as real and as a living continuum or nexus” (Dilthey 1894/2010, 119; see also Dilthey 1883/1989, 79—80).[[8]](#footnote-8) He rejects explanatory psychology precisely because it destroys the immediate givenness of inner experience. Seeking to derive knowledge of psychic life from a limited number of univocally determined elements, explanatory psychology introduces hypothetical thinking into the study of psychic life (Dilthey 1894/2010, 116—117, 133—134). In this way, it destroys the primary experience of connectedness and fosters a “skeptical spirit” (Dilthey 1894/2010, 121). Descriptive psychology, in contrast, seeks to recapture the intrinsic structure of inner experience and preserves its immediate givenness (see e.g. Feest 2007, Makkreel 1992)**.** Ultimately, Dilthey’s hope is that since they are based on non-phenomenal inner experience, the human sciences can also reach non-phenomenal knowledge.

In this paper, I will not assess whether Dilthey is successful in demonstrating the non-phenomenal character of knowledge in the human sciences. I doubt that he is, even if the promise of non-phenomenal knowledge is among his chief motivations for making inner experience foundational. I merely address the more basic question of how Dilthey argues for the possibility of valid knowledge in the human sciences, where validity is not identified with non-phenomenality. As stated above, Dilthey holds that

1. valid descriptions of inner experience are possible, and that
2. the socio-historical world is epistemically accessible from the standpoint of inner experience.

We can now finally proceed to recapitulating Dilthey’s arguments for the first of these points. Dilthey is well aware that the immediate certainty of inner experience is quite different from the validity of scientific statements that can be made about it. As he observes, descriptions of inner experience are only valid if “the cognitive acts” which generate these descriptions proceed “without adding anything that would alter their content or bring their truth into question” (Dilthey 1880-1890/1989a, 272).

Hence, Dilthey needs to show that descriptions of inner experience preserve the content of inner experience. In response to this challenge, he draws on the concept of the psychic nexus “articulating” itself. His argument runs as follows:

1. The psychic nexus articulates its functions.
2. The psychic nexus articulates representations of the contents of experience.
3. The psychic nexus articulates representations of itself (as a content of inner experience).
4. These representations are valid because psychic structure is universal.

In the following, I will explain each if these points in detail, drawing primarily on Dilthey’s analysis in *Ideen über eine beschreibende und zergliedernde Psychologie* (1894).

(ad a) As mentioned above, the “psychic nexus” is the nexus of the “facts of consciousness” that are given in outer and inner experience (narrow). It is the living and dynamic totality of all our perceptions, representations, feelings, and volitions. Now according to Dilthey, this nexus is a relational and teleological structure. The psychic nexus is relational, because the “psychological life-unit” is conditioned by a surrounding milieu and (re-)acts upon it. It is teleological, because the nexus is organized around a core of “drives and feelings” that work towards reaching a stable equilibrium between the psychic nexus and the milieu (Dilthey 1894/2010, 151). In the process of adapting itself to the milieu, the nexus produces an articulated organization of inner states and functions. Thus, an “increasing differentiation and independence of the various functions and parts as well as […] higher-level connections” (Dilthey 1894/2010, 182) emerge. Dilthey refers to this process as “articulation” (Dilthey 1894/2010, 207; Dilthey 1892-93/2010, 70).[[9]](#footnote-9)

(ad b) Dilthey rejects the Kantian distinction between sensibility and the intellect. In his view, experience is already structured by elementary logical operations (*elementare logische Operationen*), such as association, reproduction, comparison, distinction, and discerning of gradations (Dilthey 1894/2010, 124). These elementary logical operations do not stem from a source that is separate from sensibility (Dilthey 1894/2010, 146; Dilthey 1893/1989, 374). Hence for Dilthey, there is a continuity between perception and experience on the one hand, and reflection and representation on the other (Dilthey 1880-1890/1989b, 397, 403, Dilthey 1894/2010, 146). This continuity establishes that the psychic nexus articulates not only its functions. On the basis of elementary logical operations, it also articulates representations of the contents of experience. That is, by associating, comparing, distinguishing etc. the contents of our experience, we naturally arrive at judgments about and descriptions of experience. Dilthey’s central point is that because the elementary logical operations are immanent in experience, this is a continuous process that does not change the contents of experience.

(ad c) Remember that the psychic nexus is itself apprehended in inner experience (broad). The psychic nexus – its contents, functions and structures – is thus itself a content of inner experience. Therefore, the psychic nexus can build out representations of itself. Articulation is not just a horizontal process in which various psychic functions are differentiated, it is also a vertical process that runs from inner experience to representations of the psychic nexus. This becomes evident when Dilthey describes psychological analysis as a form of articulation:

“[P]sychological thought articulates and distinguishes by starting with the overall given nexus… Psychic life will be conceived as a nexus of functions connecting the constituent parts, which in turn consists of specific systems, each of which presents new tasks for psychology. Since these tasks can only be accomplished by means of articulation, descriptive psychology must at the same time be analytical psychology. By *analysis* we always understand the articulation of a given complex reality.” (Dilthey 1895-96/2010, 148).

Dilthey does not provide a very detailed account of how this works. But in *Ideen*, he mentions a variety of different processes, such as the gradual elucidation of regular connections, the process of abstraction by which our knowledge of psychological regularities is transformed into classifications and definitions, as well as the apprehension and subsequent description of psychic structure as a part-whole relation (Dilthey 1894/2010, 118—121, 126—127). All these processes, he suggests, make the psychic nexus form out its own representations (Dilthey (1892/1957, 85-86, 1894/2010, 148). And Dilthey is convinced that nothing is lost in this process: neither the analysis of the psychic continuum into its differentiated constituents, nor the abstract character of the descriptions of psychological science will change the nature of the experiential process, or the contents of inner experience (Dilthey 1880-1890/1989a, 371-372). The descriptions of psychological science recapture the structure and content of inner experience because they are articulations of the psychic nexus that is given in inner experience.

(ad d) Dilthey defines “objective validity” as that which is verifiable in the context of inner experience (Dilthey 1894/2010, 127). A psychological description is valid, if it can be verified by reference to each and everyone’s inner life. The presupposition is, of course, that the articulation of the psychic nexus will form the same representations in all human beings. On Dilthey’s analysis, valid descriptions of inner experience are possible because the psychic nexus articulates representations of itself which do not change the content of inner experience, and because this process is uniform in all of us.

Unfortunately, Dilthey does not provide an argument to defend his universalism about psychic structure. Moreover, his rationale for the claim that the descriptions of psychological science preserve the contents of experience remains somewhat sketchy. His claims (a) to (d) are not elaborated in sufficient detail for a truly conclusive argument to emerge. Nevertheless, they do form a consistent picture. In this picture, the articulation of the psychic nexus establishes a continuity between inner experience and its representation. The scientific knowledge of psychology then, is nothing other than a clearer, more precise articulation of the basic process that already occurs in lived experience.

**2. Epistemic access to the socio-historical world**

The goal of Dilthey’s foundational project is to show not only how there can be valid descriptions of the inner life of individual life-units, but how there can be valid statements about complex, supra-individual socio-historical realities. And as noted above, Dilthey believes that inner experience serves as the foundation of valid knowledge in *all the human sciences*. As expressed clearly in *Ideen*, the knowledge claims of all human sciences are based on their objects being “given *originaliter* from within” (Dilthey 1894/2010, 119). This formulation suggests that complex, supra-individual socio-historical entities like the state, law, art, economics, religion, etc., can somehow be known “from within” – they are accessible through inner experience. Dilthey has thus set a further task for his foundational project. If the validity of scientific statements about socio-historical realities is rooted in the immediacy of inner experience, a solution to the foundational problem has to run via an exploration of how inner experience can provide epistemic access to an external world that “contains human facts and spiritual meaning” (Dilthey 1883/1989, 72). In this section, I explore Dilthey’s arguments for (2): the view that the socio-historical world is epistemically accessible from the standpoint of inner experience.

As stated above, Dilthey notes that the individual life-unit is an abstraction: there are no individuals that are not already socio-historical beings. This idea seems to be in tension with the distinction between inner and outer experience, at least to the extent that it corresponds to a distinction between individual inner life on the one hand, and social outer life on the other. Dilthey resolves this tension by again drawing on the concept of “articulation”. He explains that “inner experience” and “reflective experience” can provide access to socio-historical objects because these objects are themselves articulations of the psychic nexus. That is, he argues for the thesis that both individual inner life and social outer life are constituted by mental-spiritual facts.

In this section, I first explicate the concept of “reflective experience” and its relation to “inner experience”. On this basis, I then proceed to Dilthey’s account of socio-historical objects as provided in his theory of individuation, types and values.

The concept of „reflective experience“ is first introduced in *Über vergleichende Psychologie/Beiträge zum Studium der Individualität* *(1895-96)*. Here, Dilthey posits a third kind of experience – also referred to as “transcendental experience” – that connects inner and outer experience in a way that enables an extension of the range of mental-spiritual facts to the sphere of external objects (Dilthey 1895-96/2010, 217). Reflective experience makes us recognize in external objects a trigger to “transfer our own self or an analogue of it into them” (Dilthey 1895-96/2010, 218). By projecting our own inner life onto those external objects, we experience them as endowed with mental-spiritual meaning. Reflective experience makes it possible for the human sciences to view “spiritual-cultural facts as manifest in objects of sense” (Dilthey 1895-96/2010, 217).

Taken by itself, the transcendental function of reflective experience is rather limited. It provides for the possibility of recognizing that external objects are endowed with spiritual-cultural meaning. It does not make available the concrete categories that are required for describing these objects.[[10]](#footnote-10) According to Dilthey, categories such as substance, causality, individuality, essence, purpose, etc. are “life-categories” that derive not from reflective experience, but from inner experience (broad). They are “concepts that are extracted from life itself and then filtered by a process of abstraction“ (Dilthey 1892-93/2010, 72). The question arises how categories extracted from inner experience, and applied to external objects by reflective experience, can yield objectively valid knowledge.

To answer to this problem, Dilthey devises an account of how the objects of the socio-historical world are themselves constituted by psychological forces. In the *Berlin Plan* for Volume II of the *Einleitung*, he hints towards a form of inner life that goes beyond individual experience, but is still based on it: “there is always inner life, although individuals come and go” (Dilthey 1893/1989, 490). In *Einleitung*, he expresses a similar thought, arguing that the enduring formations of the socio-historical world “emerge from the living nexus of the human soul” (Dilthey 1894/2010, 123). Psychological facts are the basis of “cultural systems”, as well as of the “external organization” of the state. These are thus supra-individual entities, but according to Dilthey, they are still psychologically constituted (Dilthey 1883/1989, 94, 117-118).

A more detailed reconstruction of Dilthey’s account of socio-historical objects can be given on the basis of his theory of individuation and his theory of values. It will become apparent that in both contexts, Dilthey draws on the same concept that he had also employed to tackle the problem of psychological knowledge: the “articulation” of the psychic nexus.

As noted above, Dilthey endorses a universalism about human nature. He views humanity as uniform on a basic psychological level. In *Ideen*, he suggests that apparent qualitative differences between humans are actually just differences in the quantitative relationships between various character traits (Dilthey 1894/2010, 151—152). But because the psychic nexus is a dynamic and structured totality that articulates itself in a milieu, it connects the various quantitatively determined traits into purposive wholes. Whenever quantitative traits are articulated into structured, purposive wholes, individuation occurs (Dilthey 1894/2010, 206). The common structure of the psychic nexus is thus at the same time also the basis of individuation and social differentiation.

According to Dilthey, the process of individuation is such that certain types and typical differences – between sexes, races, and nationalities, but also between the poet, the religious person, the statesman and the scientist – recur in all variation. In these types, the traits, parts, and functions of the articulated psychic nexus are regularly connected (Dilthey 1895-96/2010, 238—239). Types are stable and regular results of the process of individuation, and as such, they are real social entities. The type is not merely a concept that we project onto social reality by analogy with inner experience. It is a real configuration that emerges as an articulation of the psychic nexus.

Dilthey writes that types also involve a value dimension. The unity and significance of the type is dependent on a norm: a typical individual can represent an entire class only to the extent that the individual is appropriate to the norm that regulates in- and exclusion to the class (Dilthey 1895-96/2010, 247). To fully appreciate this point, we need to take a look at how Dilthey thinks about norms and values. Crucially, Dilthey gives a psychological account of values as tied to feelings of pleasure and displeasure, approval and disapproval. “Only that which is experienced through feeling has a value for us, value is accordingly inseparable from feeling” (Dilthey 1894/2010, 187). Feelings attribute positive or negative values to elements of the surrounding milieu, they function as a sign-system for “the kinds and degrees of life-value found in the states of the self and the conditions affecting this self” (Dilthey 1894/2010, 179).

In his lectures on ethics, Dilthey traces the roots of moral values in the inner connections between drives, feelings and volitions (Dilthey 1890/1958, 49-52). He identifies certain primitive moral dispositions – such as the joy of acting on one’s will, the feeling of benevolence and a sense of duty – which are the basis for “forces or forms of social life“ (Dilthey 1890/1958, 87). And he explains that individual moral forces which reoccur regularly can be coordinated into structured wholes such as to create “total forces or second-order social forces” (Dilthey 1890/1958, 88-89). In line with the concept of articulation, this makes room for a moral education of mankind in the historical process, in which more abstract, mental-spiritual feelings and values emerge (Dilthey 1894/2010, 179—181). As Dilthey puts it, values are developed first in feeling, and then in “their *articulation* into extensive purposive systems” (Dilthey 1895-96/2010, 220, my emphasis).

Hence, values are articulated from the psychic nexus, embodied in types and active in purposive social systems. They give meaning to the socio-historical objects of the human sciences. When studying the social world, the human sciences do not merely project values onto social reality. They grasp meaningful structures that have emerged from the articulation of the psychic nexus.

We can now better understand Dilthey’s reasons for the claim that the socio-historical world is epistemically accessible from the standpoint of inner experience: the objects that constitute this world are themselves articulations of the psychic nexus. Thus, they are constituted by something that is in principle accessible to inner experience. To the extent that we experience the psychic nexus, we also at least partially experience how the social world is articulated from it. A continuity of mental-spiritual facts connects individual inner life and social outer life and ensures that the latter is accessible from the standpoint of the former.

At this point, we have arrived at Dilthey’s full answer to how valid knowledge in the human sciences is possible. Because

1. valid descriptions of inner experience are possible, and because
2. the socio-historical world is epistemically accessible from the standpoint of inner experience

we can form valid representations of the socio-historical world as it is disclosed in inner experience. Valid knowledge in the human sciences is possible, to the extent that it is based on such representations.

It now appears that for Dilthey “objective validity” refers to some form of correspondence between the “life-categories” used by the human sciences, and the objects of the socio-historical world. Dilthey is not too clear about this point, but he seems to assume that because both the categories which the human sciences operate, and the objects that they describe are articulations of the psychic nexus, they may also correspond to one another. Unfortunately, he does not argue for this point in detail.

But even with the apparent gaps in Dilthey’s arguments, we can discern in his multi-layered reflections on psychology and the human sciences a consistent foundational project. Dilthey deems psychology central for elucidating the conditions of valid knowledge in the human sciences. He thinks that psychology establishes the continuity between inner experience and its representation and that in this way, it reveals how valid psychological descriptions are possible (1). He also thinks that psychology can provide an account of how the objects of the socio-historical world are accessible from the standpoint of inner experience. By showing these objects to be articulated from the operation of the psychic nexus, psychology explicates the conditions for valid knowledge about socio-historical objects (2). These ideas qualify his philosophy of the 1880s and 1890s as a psychologically grounded epistemology of the human sciences.

**3. The charge of psychologism**

Given the central role that psychology played in his foundational project, it is not surprising that Dilthey was frequently charged with psychologism. However, is not always clear what is implied when the term “psychologism” is used. Sometimes, psychologism is taken to be the view that the conditions for valid knowledge are psychological rather than transcendental, sometimes psychologism is defined as a reductive view of meaning, according to which understanding a text or utterance consists in reproducing the author’s state of mind.[[11]](#footnote-11) In this section, I draw on the broader spectrum of definitions and accounts that was available during Dilthey’s lifetime. I seek to give a rigorous analysis of the various forms of psychologism, and ultimately, to reassess the foundational project of the 1880s and 1890s in light of this analysis. To allow for a focused discussion, I restrict my attention to three of Dilthey’s contemporaries who were familiar with his work, and who, in their criticisms of psychologism and historicism, spoke directly to his philosophy: Husserl, and the Neo-Kantians Windelband and Rickert.[[12]](#footnote-12) I proceed as follows: I first highlight the differences and commonalities between their views. Then I measure Dilthey’s foundational project by their standards. I argue that Dilthey did indeed champion a psychologistic philosophy, but that his psychologism is a feature, not a bug. It is precisely the psychologistic concept of “articulation” that allows Dilthey to account for the possibility of valid knowledge and cultural meaning.

According to one definition, psychologism states that the laws of logic are laws of thinking, and, as such, psychological laws. This is now perhaps the most entrenched understanding of psychologism, so it makes sense to look at it in some detail. In *Prolegomena* of *Logische Untersuchungen*, Husserl delivers the first detailed critique of the various forms of this doctrine. In his view, psychologism is shaped by three fundamental “prejudices”. First, the idea that the laws of logic are normative laws which aim to regulate our psychological life; second, the idea that the contents that logic deals with – judgments, syllogisms, proofs, etc. – are psychological entities; and third, the idea that evidence is a psychological feeling, with logical sentences clarifying the conditions under which we experience this feeling (Husserl 1900/1992, 159, 170-171, 183).

Husserl engages with a wide range of psychologistic claims and offers a broad variety of counter-arguments. Two are of particular importance. The first argument convicts psychologism of a category mistake. At various points in *Logische Untersuchungen*, Husserl makes clear that the attempt to derive logical laws from empirical psychology has to fail. It has to fail, because from empirical laws one can at best derive other empirical laws – while logic is essentially unempirical. Logical *necessity* cannot be derived from *accidental* empirical facts; the *certain* knowledge that we have of logical laws cannot be gained from *probabililistic* knowledge of empirical laws; and *atemporal* truth cannot be based on psychological states that *change in time* (Husserl 1900/1992, 74—76, 87, 130—131, 137).

The second counter-argument focuses on the consequences of psychologism. According to Husserl, psychologism leads to “skeptical relativism”. It makes truth relative to the psychological acts of an individual (“individual relativism”) or to the psychological constitution of the human species (“specific relativism” or “anthropologism”). Relativizing truth in this way allows that the same “judgment-content” is true for one individual or species, but false for another. This, according to Husserl, goes against the very meaning of the words “true” and “false” (Husserl 1900/1992, 124—125). Qua relativism, psychologism ends up undermining the conditions of possibility of any theory, including itself (Husserl 1900/1992, 119—120).

This already reveals what, according to Husserl, are the essential features of logic: the laws of logic are ideal and objective. Hence, Husserl rejects more traditional forms of anti-psychologism which define logic by recourse to its normativity. On his account, logical principles are not norms, and although logic can take on normative functions, these normative functions are based on and derived from logic as a theoretical discipline. The opposite to psychologistic “natural laws” of logic is thus not to be found in “normal laws”, but in “ideal laws” (Husserl 1900/1992, 168)

When Husserl criticizes Dilthey’s philosophy of worldviews as a form of “historicism”, he conceptualizes the historicist threat along parallel lines. Just like he had defended logic as a theoretical discipline of ideal laws against psychologism, he now seeks to defend philosophy as an exact science against historicism. In his view, historicism commits a category mistake. It assumes that history has something to contribute to questions of philosophical validity. But this is not the case, since history deals with empirical facts, not with the ideal and objective principles which provide the grounds for assessments of validity. The attempt to historicize the ideas of “truth”, “science” and “theory” ultimately leads to denying philosophy’s objective, ahistorical validity: historicism produces a “skeptical subjectivism” (Husserl 1911/2009, 51—55).

The history of the psychologism and historicism charges did not begin with Husserl’s attacks, however. Almost twenty years before the *Prolegomena*, Windelband had already formulated a critique of psychologism, historicism and their relativist consequences in his *Kritische oder genetische Methode* (Windelband 1883/1924, 99—135). But Windelband belongs to the normative paradigm of anti-psychologism that Husserl rejected.[[13]](#footnote-13) Taking its cues from Kant, Windelband’s philosophical project turns towards a systematic reflection on the transcendental conditions that allow for mutual understanding and scientific knowledge. (Windelband 1881/1924, 122-123). And in Windelband’s view, these transcendental conditions have a normative character. Windelband uses the terms “axioms”, “norms” and “values” almost interchangeably to refer to the normative principles that determine and justify true knowledge in science, good will in morality, and beauty in art. Philosophy investigates these principles, it is “the critical science of necessary and universal values“ (Windelband 1882/1924, 29).

Although Windelband speaks of philosophy as a science, he also emphasizes the differences between the scientific and the philosophical method. Empirical science is a descriptive and explanatory enterprise. The concern of philosophy, in contrast, is not a *quaestio facti*, but a *quaestio juris* (Windelband 1882/1924, 26).

As Katherina Kinzel has shown, Windelband rejects psychologism and historicism precisely because they violate the boundary between empirical science and philosophy’s normative concerns. They apply the “genetic method” of empirical science to the philosophical quest for validity and by doing so, incur relativism (Kinzel 2017, 95-96).

In *Kritische oder genertische Methode?* Windelband pushes two lines of argument against the use of the “genetic method” in philosophy. First, generalizations from psychological or historical facts cannot ground normativity, because empirical generalizations give us only “approximations”. They do not provide the universality and necessity that is characteristic of genuine normative validity. Second, if normative validity is not in principle different from empirical prevalence, then all empirically prevalent beliefs, acts and feelings are equally justified. There is always a plurality of actually prevalent beliefs, acts and feelings, Windelband reasons. If validity is reduced to actual prevalence, then there are no means for distinguishing between them (see also Kinzel 2017, 96). As a consequence, the genetic method leads to relativism. It “must treat all beliefs as equally justified because they are all equally necessary by nature” (Windelband 1883/1924, 115).

In this context, Windelband also indirectly accuses Dilthey of historicism, and possibly also of psychologism. He writes that the “critique of historical reason” is a worthwhile project as long as it operates with an independent, non-empirical standard. The implication is, of course, that Dilthey lacks such a standard and that, therefore, he is guilty of historicism, psychologism and relativism (Windelband 1883/1924, 120).

We have now encountered two views on psychologism and historicism that, although formulated with different goals in mind, are structurally similar. Both think that psychologism and historicism involve a category mistake, and both worry that because of this mistake, psychologism and historicism lead to relativism.

The situation is more complicated with Rickert. While Rickert too criticizes historicism as a form of relativism, he does not mention Dilthey in this context (Rickert 1907, 401-402). Instead, he engages with Dilthey’s writings in detail in his *Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung*, where he brands Dilthey a psychologistic thinker. Rickert’s use of the term “psychologism” ties in with a long tradition of skepticism regarding the use of psychology in history. From Hegel onwards, nineteenth-century historians and philosophers criticized the appeal to psychological explanations in the study of history. The general worry was that attention to the psychological motivations of historical actors reduces the historical process to contingent factors, and makes it impossible to identify general totalities and tendencies in history.[[14]](#footnote-14) Rickert’s attack on psychologism is a reformulation of these worries in Neo-Kantian terms.

In *Grenzen* Rickert takes up and revises Windelband’s distinction between the “nomothetic” and the “idiographic” sciences (Windelband 1894/1924, 136—160). He presents a logical-methodological analysis of “concept formation” in the sciences, that is, of how different sciences simplify, select and re-mold empirical reality. In his analysis, the natural sciences abstract and generalize, while the historical sciences “individualize” – they form concepts which express an individual, unique and unrepeatable, and in this sense historical, content (Rickert 1921, 231—233). According to Rickert, the procedure of individualization depends upon values. It is only in relation to universally acknowledged values that historical entities, so called “individualities”, can be grasped as meaningful unities (Rickert 1921, 240-242)

Rickert thinks of his analysis as logical and formal in character. He strongly objects to the attempt to give the human sciences a psychological foundation, a project that he deems “psychologistic” (Rickert 1921, 376). The basic mistake of psychologism is to believe that the “mental” or “psychological” character of historical facts has consequences for the epistemological justification of historical method and knowledge.

Rickert agrees that history deals with psychological material. And yet, he insists that this has no consequences for the epistemological foundation of history. One reason for this is that cultural meaning cannot be reduced to psychological states. Psychic life is tied to separate individuals, while the cultural world of history is a shared, supra-individual world. It thus has to consists of something non-psychological (Rickert 1921, 140). More specifically, this world consists of unreal meaning configurations (*irreale Sinngebilde*) which attach to the historical-cultural realities studied by the historian (Rickert 1921, 405—407). What distinguishes the natural and the historical sciences on the level of objects is that the former deal with “meaningless“ realities, while the latter study empirical material only to reveal “unreal” meaning configurations. These meaning configurations, in turn, are grounded in values – the same values that are also the basis of the individuating method (Rickert 1921, 409—412). By giving a psychological – as opposed to a logical-formal – foundation of the historical sciences, psychologism misconstrues the methods of historical science and the nature of the historical world.

We can see that the three psychologism charges share a similar structure. The make the following three claims

1. Psychologism involves the crossing of a disciplinary boundary.
2. The boundary crossing amounts to a category mistake.
3. The boundary crossing is destructive.

Although Rickert’s transfers the concept of psychologism from its previous domain of application – a discussion of the relations between psychology on the one hand, logic and philosophy on the other – to the context of history, his arguments too express this common structure. Rickert insists on a strict separation between psychology and history, as well as on a strict separation between psychology and epistemology. Psychologism violates both these boundaries. It is psychology masquerading as epistemology and as such leads to a destructive misconstrual of the socio-historical world.

Having reconstructed the main accounts and criticisms of psychologism that were available at Dilthey’s life-time, we are now better equipped to assess his philosophical project in light of these charges.

I begin with Dilthey’s views on logic. As recapitulated above, Dilthey devises a theory of elementary logical operations as immanent in experience itself. And the rejection of the Kantian dualism between sensibility and intellect goes both ways: on the one hand, experience is permeated by elementary logical operations. On the other hand, logical principles are themselves experiences. “The elementary logical operations … themselves are modes of experiencing, and … accordingly possess the certainty of all inner perception“ (Dilthey 1893/1989, 480). In line with this idea, Dilthey also writes of axioms and logical rules as facts of consciousness (Dilthey 1880-1890/1989a, 248-249), of logical necessity as a coercion of the will (Dilthey 1893/1989, 476), and of necessity and evidence as being rooted in a feeling of certainty (Dilthey 1880-1890/1989a, 282). He takes formal logic to be an abstraction from individual acts of connecting thought-contents and thinks that as such, formal logic should not be separated from a developmental history of human intelligence (Dilthey 1880-1890/1989b, 400, 402, 404). By Husserl’s standards, Dilthey’s views on logic are clearly shaped by the psychologistic “prejudices” that Husserl had identified. Logic regulates our psychological experience, its contents are psychological entities; and evidence and necessity are based on feeling.

A similar point can be made about Dilthey’s views on norms and values. As I have shown above, Dilthey gives an account of values as emerging together with feelings of pleasure and displeasure, approval and disapproval. Values are first and foremost life-values which are rooted in drives and feelings. Dilthey also states explicitly that there is no a priori answer to the question as to what is ethical. He acknowledges that what is a universal value for us now has developed historically (Dilthey 1890/1958, 88, 90; Dilthey 1893/1989, 445). As a result, he struggles to maintain a sense of normativity and moral obligation that is independent from the life of drives and feelings, in particular from feelings of pleasure and displeasure.

In *System der Ethik*, Dilthey answers to this challenge by thinking of moral judgments in terms of a synthesis which is grounded not in pleasure, but in “the inner value of the person” (Dilthey 1890/1958, 111). But in the same text, he derives the ideal of personhood and inner value by way of a genetic account of psychological development. Personhood is not a transcendental norm, even if Dilthey uses the term “a priori synthesis” to describe its basic function. Rather, the norm of personhood emerges from “benevolence” (*Wohlwollen*) which in turn develops from a feeling of solidarity and the experience of another person’s independence (Dilthey 1890/1958, 96-71, 78-79; see also Dilthey 1890/2010, 30). And while the articulation of psychic life can lead to the emergence of higher values, these higher values remain tied to psychic life.

“If the value of a content appears to be removed from every individual consciousness, universally valid, and superindividual, this means only that the content is felt in such a way in every consciousness… its value is thus independent not of consciousness, but only of each single, real consciousness” (Dilthey 1880-1890/1989c, 444).

By Windelband’s standards, Dilthey’s approach to values seems “psychologistic” enough.

Finally, the same point seems to apply to Dilthey’s views on the objects of historical science. Dilthey is well aware that the concepts of the human sciences go beyond the concepts of individual psychology. As he puts it, there remains a gap between the “first-order concepts” of individual psychology and the “second-order concepts” that describe complex socio-historical realities (Dilthey 1883/1989, 96). And as reconstructed above, Dilthey seeks to close this gap by conceptualizing socio-historical realities as psychological articulations. Articulation makes the concepts of psychology, which deals with the basic elements “from which society and history are formed“ (Dilthey, 1883/1989, 80) continuous with the second-order concepts of the human sciences and history. By Rickert’s standards, this is a “psychologistic” account of cultural meaning. Although the meaning-configurations of the socio-historical world are supra-individual and shared, they are not constituted by objective values, as Rickert has it. Rather, they are constituted by processes of psychological articulation which establish continuities between individual psychology and the socio-historical world.

Hence, if we accept the distinctions and standards that are introduced by Dilthey’s critics, his foundational project indeed comes out as “psychologistic”. The question remains whether it should be rejected for that reason. To determine whether this is the case, we need to give a more detailed analysis. As I have shown, the three key features that – according to the authors here discussed – characterize psychologism and, at the same time, make it objectionable are as follows:

1. Psychologism involves the crossing of a disciplinary boundary.
2. The boundary-crossing amounts to a category mistake.
3. The boundary-crossing is destructive.

As I will try to make plausible, Dilthey is guilty of (i) and possibly (ii). But he is not guilty of (iii). His psychologistic concept of “articulation” promises a solution to the problem of validity and cultural meaning in the human sciences. It is not a destructive concept, but a productive one.

(ad i) On the first point, it is fairly obvious that Dilthey is crossing disciplinary boundaries. His philosophical thinking is averse to the boundary policing and to the distinctions that both Husserl and the Neo-Kantians implement when dealing with the role of psychology vis à vis logic, philosophy and history. Dilthey does not think that there is a boundary between empirical psychology on the one hand, and logic, ethics and history on the other. In his view, the essential connectedness of psychic life grounds the essential continuity of these domains. The gist of the concept of articulation is precisely that the abstract forms of logic, the universal norms of morality and the shared world of socio-historical meanings constitute realities that go beyond individual psychic life, but that, at the same time, are continuous with it.

(ad ii) Whether Dilthey commits a category mistake is harder to determine, at least if we do not wish to beg the question. A category mistake can only be committed if there is an essential difference between domains that allows for the misapplication of categories from one domain to the other. So to charge Dilthey in light of (ii) is to assume an essential distinction between the realm of the empirical and the realm of the objective or normative, or between individual psychology and socio-historical reality – and these are distinctions that Dilthey rejects in the first place. Nevertheless, we might argue that the distinctions at stake are so widely accepted and deeply entrenched, that it is justified to treat them as the default position in the conflict between Dilthey and his critics. In this case, Dilthey would emerge as guilty of (ii).

(ad iii) But ultimately, psychologism stands and falls with its philosophical consequences. The question is whether the distinctions that are so dear to Husserl and the Neo-Kantians are necessary, in order to preserve the desirable features of objectivity, normativity and cultural meaning. The question boils down to whether Dilthey’s psychologism is destructive. I want to argue that this is not the case, at least not when it comes to those concerns that are at the heart of Dilthey’s own foundational project. After all, Dilthey seeks to show that objectively valid knowledge in the human sciences is possible, and the psychologistic concepts that he introduces serve this aim.

When it comes to his account of (1) – of how valid representations of inner experience are possible – Dilthey argues that the psychic nexus articulates representations of itself, and that these representations do not change the content of inner experience. The idea that experience is already structured by “elementary logical operations” which establish a continuity between perception and experience on the one hand, and reflection and representation on the other, plays a central role in this argument (Dilthey 1880-1890/1989b, 397, 403, Dilthey 1894/2010, 146). It is thus precisely the psychologistic violation of the boundary between experience and logic that establishes that the psychic nexus can articulate representations of its own structure. And as I have shown above, Dilthey thinks that because this process is uniform in all of us, objectively valid descriptions of inner experience are possible. While there are certainly ambiguities and gaps in Dilthey’s argument, we can appreciate that the psychologistic aspects of his thinking play a productive rather than a destructive role here.

In the context of (2) – how inner experience provides access to the socio-historical world – Dilthey provides us with an account of how the objects of the socio-historical world are themselves articulations of the psychic nexus. Dilthey thinks of the meaning-configurations of the socio-historical world as constituted by mental-spiritual facts (Dilthey 1893/1989, 490; 1894/2010, 117-118, 123). On his account, individual psychology and these meaning configurations are connected by the continuity of psychic life. Again, it is precisely in virtue of violating a boundary – the boundary between individual psychology and collective socio-historical reality – that the concept of articulation can establish the possibility of valid knowledge about the socio-historical world. The socio-historical world is epistemically accessible from the standpoint of inner experience precisely because its objects are constituted by something which is accessible to inner experience. Again, Dilthey might not provide all the details here, but it seems clear that the psychologistic boundary-crossing that he engages in is conductive of his philosophical aims. Within the context of his foundational project, Dilthey’s psychologism is a feature, not a bug: it is precisely the psychologistic concept of “articulation” that allows Dilthey to maintain the possibility of objective validity in the human sciences.

**4. Conclusions: psychology and hermeneutics**

I want to conclude by outlining the implications of my reconstruction for some of the larger interpretative issues that arise in Dilthey scholarship. In particular, I will give a brief outlook on how the interpretation provided in this paper might be relevant for understanding the relation between Dilthey’s descriptive psychology and his hermeneutics.

Although the idea that Dilthey’s psychological works from the 1880s and 1890s and his hermeneutical theory from the 1900s are separated by a sharp break is now widely discredited, many commentators still observe a gradual shift in Dilthey’s thinking. Perhaps this shift is best captured by saying that around 1900, hermeneutic considerations become more central in Dilthey’s attempt to formulate a foundational epistemology of the human sciences. [[15]](#footnote-15) And many commentators who have studied this shift have emphasized the limits of Dilthey’s psychological approach of the 1880s and 1890s, and have come to view his mature hermeneutic theory as an improvement. It often seems as if some version of the psychologism charge were in the background of these reservations.

For example, Ermarth stresses Dilthey’s continuous doubts about psychology and claims that these doubts ultimately led him to discover *Verstehen* as a new foundation beyond the plane of his psychological investigations (Ermarth 1978, 181—183). The transition to hermeneutics implied a staunch revision in how he thought about meaning. In particular, the idea “that the relations which characterize mental life are not causal relations among psychic acts, but structural relations among the contents of those acts” (Ermarth 1978, 204) is a hallmarks of Dilthey’s later, hermeneutical thought that was not yet present in the psychological writings. A similar diagnosis is expressed by Jung, for whom Dilthey’s hermeneutics “puts to the center the understanding of symbolically articulated meanings, and no longer the psychological description of mental states” (Jung 1996, 139). Jung makes the concept of articulation that I have stressed in this paper central as well, but for him, articulation points towards a pragmatic theory of meaning that is strongest once the reference to inner experience is dropped (Jung 2003).

Makkreel’s account of Dilthey’s transition to hermeneutics too ends up stressing the limits of descriptive psychology. According to Makkreel, the concept of reflective experience provides a transitional link between Dilthey’s psychology and his developed hermeneutic-historical theory. And yet, on Makkreel’s reading, Dilthey’s attempts to widen the scope of his psychology ultimately undermined it (Makkreel 1992, 245—246, 254—258). The defect of Dilthey’s descriptive psychology consisted in thinking of the understanding of others as an extension of inner experience: “self-understanding was more fundamental than the understanding of others.” (Makkreel 1992, 251). According to Makreel, Dilthey’s mature hermeneutic theory emerges only when this assumption is dropped, and when the confirmation of intersubjectivity becomes the primary methodological concern (Makkreel 1992, 296—303).

The common narrative is that Dilthey’s hermeneutical theory overcomes a psychologistic account of meaning that prioritizes inner experience. To conclude this paper, I want to offer a brief sketch of how my own interpretation might offer an alternative to this common narrative.

I agree that the concept of “understanding” that Dilthey offers in his psychological writings is somewhat limited. Dilthey describes understanding as an analogical inference from inner life that is based on the universality of psychic structure (Dilthey 1894/2010, 170-171; 1895-96/2010, 219), or as a re-creation of experience that proceeds on the basis of sympathy (Dilthey 1895-96/2010, 245-246). Both formulations privilege individual inner experience in a way that makes it hard to see how it could truly provide epistemic access to an external world that contains supra-individual “human facts and spiritual meaning” (Dilthey 1883/1989, 72).

If, however, we focus less on “understanding”, and more on the complex account of “articulation” that I have reconstructed in this paper, Dilthey’s descriptive psychology seems much less restricted by the prioritizing of inner experience. Quite to the contrary, it can be acknowledged that the concept of articulation already implies a hermeneutic structure. Of course, further research is needed to substantiate this claim, but I want to briefly indicate what I have in mind here.

As I have explained above, Dilthey thinks of external objects – the types, structures, and values of the social world – as articulated from the operation of the psychic nexus. Articulation establishes external socio-historical objects as mental-spiritual creations. A consequence of this view seems to be that understanding need not proceed as a projection from inner experience to external objects. Rather, understanding can take place in these objects. After all, the psychic nexus is already integrated into them. We are aware of the states and forces that constitute the social system “from within“, because we are already in the socio-historical world, participating in its structures and meanings which are our articulations (Dilthey 1883/1989, 88-89).

This view is very close to the mature hermeneutic position that Dilthey will defend in *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften* (1910). Here, Dilthey redefines understanding in terms of the threefold structure of „lived experience – expression – understanding“ (*Erlebnis – Ausdruck – Verstehen*)*.* In the reticulated structure of “lived experience – expression – understanding” no individual element takes precedence. The socio-historical world is intelligible because it is always already shaped by this structure. Dilthey now writes that ”[w]e are at home everywhere in this historical and understood world; we understand the sense and meaning of it all; we ourselves are woven into this common sphere.” (Dilthey 1910/2002, 169). Understanding meaningful expressions is a primitive fact of the socio-historical world, and scientific understanding is nothing other than a clearer, more precise articulation of this basic process as it already occurs in life-experience.

I believe that my reconstruction of Dilthey’s “epistemology of the human sciences”, in particular my account of how in Dilthey inner experience provides epistemic access to the socio-historical world, involves a concept of articulation that already points in the direction of hermeneutics: it is a small step from the idea that the objects of the socio-historical world are articulated from and thus also inhabited and understood by the psychic nexus, to the threefold structure of “lived experience – expression – understanding”.

Perhaps it is ironic that is not by downplaying, but rather by acknowledging the psychologistic aspects of Dilthey’s foundational project, that the ties between his descriptive psychology and his mature hermeneutic theory become visible in this way. In any case, the interpretation of Dilthey that I have offered in this paper suggests an alternative to the common narrative concerning the shifts in Dilthey's philosophical thinking. It suggests that we should think of these shifts less as reactions to the failure of his psychologistic descriptive psychology, than as explications of its inherent hermeneutic potential.

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1. It is debatable whether Dilthey’s fragmented and multifaceted oeuvre even allows for a general verdict on these issues. Some commentators suggest that the influence of Rickert’s and Husserl’s arguments made Dilthey’s later hermeneutics significantly less psychologistic than his writings of the 1890s (Ermarth 1978, 182—183, 200—201). Others find a stronger systematic unity in Dilthey’s works (e. g. Jung 1996; Owensby 1994*;* Rodi2003). I will touch upon the question of unity and continuity in the last section of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. My interpretation is based primarily on Dilthey’s psychological writings from the 1880s and 1890s. Dilthey’s poetology does not take central stage my analysis. This might seem surprising given that, in the poetology, Dilthey develops central psychological concepts and applies them to concrete cases. Nevertheless, I choose to focus my analysis on texts that are more explicitly concerned with providing the human sciences with an epistemological foundation. These are primarily the texts that were written in the context of the *Einleitung*, and the texts that deal with the possibility of a descriptive psychology. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. According to this interpretation, the object of the human sciences consists in the totality of human nature. In order to grasp this totality as a whole, the human sciences need to draw on a large arsenal of methods and approaches that cannot be isolated from one another. The study of culture, language, history and psychology are all on a par, and none takes precedence or is more fundamental than the others. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Note that while I distinguish between Dilthey’s methodological and his epistemological concerns, I believe that for Dilthey, epistemology “proper”, epistemological issues that arise in psychological research, and the epistemology of the human sciences are continuous with one another. When Dilthey addresses general questions about the relation between experience and knowledge, or about the justification of our belief in an external reality (Dilthey 1880-1890/1989a; 1890/2010) he draws on the same set of conceptual tools as when reflecting on the possibility of valid psychological knowledge, and on how such knowledge can provide a basis for the other human sciences. In all these contexts, “inner experience”, “lived experience”, and the “articulation” of the “psychic nexus” are the central concepts of analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A recent alternative to the Kantian interpretation finds in Dilthey the outlines of a consequent “empiricist” position (Damböck 2017). The main motivation for this interpretation seems to be the fact that, for Dilthey, concepts are themselves “facts of consciousness” and as such, they are empirical objects in their own right. On this interpretation, what distinguishes Dilthey from other empiricists – like Compte or Mill – is that he does not construe the empirical character of mental life in terms of sensations and natural laws. I agree with this basic diagnosis. But I disagree that it merits attributing an “empiricist” philosophy to Dilthey. In my view, the non-reductive character of Dilthey’s thinking jars with the label of “empiricism” quite profoundly. As will become clearer later in my analysis, the concept of “articulation” points to a view of representations as continuous with yet also irreducible to more basic psychic states and processes. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The German term “Innewerden” is standardly translated as “reflexive awareness”. I am not satisfied with this translation, since Dilthey’s “inner experience” is not reflective, and the difference between reflexion and reflection is anything but straightforward in Dilthey scholarship. For lack of a better alternative, I stick with this translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Dilthey sometimes uses the term „lived experience“ to denote our experience of the nexus of outer and inner experience. However, his use of the term is not consistent, which is why I choose the terminology of inner experience (narrow) and inner experience (broad). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Recent interpretations have questioned whether Dilthey drew the distinction between the natural and the human sciences as sharply as often assumed (Hamid 2016). To clarify my stance on this issue, I believe it is important to distinguish between three levels of analysis: methodology, epistemology, and philosophy of life. Dilthey’s distinction is not entirely clearcut on the level of methodology. Dilthey presents the human and natural sciences as each drawing on a set of specific methods, but he clearly allows that they have some methods in common. The distinction is also not clearcut in Dilthey’s philosophy of life. Dilthey provides an account of life that serves as the common basis for both the natural and the human science. Nevertheless, I do believe that Dilthey does make a rather strict distinction when it comes to an epistemological clarification of the experiential base of scientific knowledge. He thinks that the human sciences are based on inner experience, while the natural sciences are based on outer experience, and that for this reason, the descriptions of the human sciences have a different epistemic status than the hypotheses of natural science. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The importance of the concept of articulation is highlighted in many interpretations, the most recent of which is Jung 2003. However, Jung gives “articulation” a pragmatic twist. My own account treats “articulation” as a psychological concept with epistemological functions. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Makkreel interprets reflective experience in analogy with Kant’s conception of reflective judgment, which moves from particulars to universals as yet unknown (Makkreel 1992, 226-231, 240-46). On my interpretation, reflective experience has a more limited function, and it solves the problems of Dilthey’s foundational project only when joined with the concept of “articulation”. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ineichen’s (1975; 2003) criticism is of the former sort, Gadamer’s (1960) of the latter. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Dilthey and the Baden Neo-Kantians engaged in a life-long debate about the distinction between the human and the natural sciences, the scientific status of psychology, and the methodology of history. Dilthey and Husserl explored the compatibilities and incompatibilities of their respective philosophies in a private correspondence that was initiated by Dilthey in response to Husserl’s unsympathetic *Logos* article. A historical reconstruction of these exchanges is beyond the scope of this paper. With respect to the Neo-Kantians, I restrict my focus to their views about psychology. I do not analyze in great detail the related issue of science demarcation. With respect to Husserl, I focus exclusively on the *Prolegomena*, leaving aside the question as to how much the later Husserl was influenced by Dilthey and vice versa. (Jalbert 1988; Luft 2016; Makkreel, 1969; 1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For historical accounts of the chasm between normative and objectivist anti-psychologisms, see Anderson 2005; Kusch 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Hegel argues that the psychological particularities of individuals have little to do with genuine history, which takes place on a general, supra-individual level. This negative verdict on psychology was widely shared, for example by Wilhelm von Humboldt and by the historian Johann Gustav Droysen. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. To frame this shift in terms of a transition from psychology to hermeneutics tout court would be misleading. From early on in his intellectual career, Dilthey was preoccupied with questions of hermeneutics, and he worked on an extensive Schleiermacher monograph throughout most of his academic life (see Rütsche 1999). Hence, the shift should not be conceptualized in terms of a new concern with hermeneutics emerging in Dilthey, but rather in terms of hermeneutics beginning to play a foundational role for the human sciences. Put differently, hermeneutics does not come “after” psychology if we consider Dilthey’s overall intellectual endeavours. But it comes “after” psychology from the standpoint of the foundational project. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)