



CHAPTER THREE

Understanding, Psychology, and the Human Sciences: Dilthey and *Völkerpsychologie*

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3.1. INTRODUCTION: TRADITIONS

At the end of the eighteenth century, in the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, Kant argued that the only “true” sciences were those that could be given a mathematical foundation. He exempted psychology from the true sciences, arguing that no mathematical analysis could be given of the occurrence of thoughts and ideas. Johann Friedrich Herbart and others in the tradition of empirical psychology (later including Wundt, Fechner, and Weber) took Kant’s words as a challenge, coming up with ways to quantify sensation and perception and to test them experimentally. But Kant’s more fundamental distinction between mathematically based, *a priori* sciences and inductive, *a posteriori* sciences based on observation lingered.

The schools of neo-Kantianism that followed took differing positions on Kant’s stance. The Southwest School, or Baden School, argued for a dualism between nature and value, taking the position that beyond the objects present to us, there are also meaningful and valid relations of valuation. The realm of value can be treated scientifically as well (Šuber 2009: § 14.2.2).

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The Marburg School had it that the realms of culture and ethics as well as of science are characterized by a transcendental analysis of facts, which are revealed in history (Cassirer [1912] 2005; Matherne 2015).¹

Along with the positions developed by the scions of the Southwest and Marburg schools, there were influential engagements with the question of how sciences based on human experience might be conducted and founded. The first was the approach of Wilhelm Dilthey and its connections with the Historical School (e.g., Droysen, Ranke, Schlosser, Niebuhr); and the second was the *Völkerpsychologie* movement founded by Moses Lazarus and Chajim Steinthal,² responding to (and inspiring) currents in cultural anthropology, linguistics, and “the sciences of the state.”³

Both these approaches, of Dilthey and of *Völkerpsychologie*, were concerned with psychology and with subjectivity. Both rejected Kant’s conception of the distinction between subject and nature (while retaining elements of the Kantian approach). The rejection of Kant’s distinction allowed for a conception of the subject as a sociohistorical self who exists only in relation with others and with history, rather than as a subject characterized fundamentally by the ability to interpret representations and thus make judgments.

During Dilthey’s early career, he was friends with Lazarus and Steinthal, visiting their houses and going on walks with them (Feest 2007: § 5.2; Kluback 1956: Ch. 1 and 2). However, they were not in agreement about how to approach the cultural or human sciences.

The account that follows will focus on two elements of the thought of Dilthey on the one hand and Lazarus and Steinthal on the other. First, Lazarus and Steinthal attempted to motivate an account of *Völkerpsychologie* based on the *Volksgeist*, a collective structure, or form, of rationality made manifest by a people or *Volk*. Dilthey argued, especially in his early work, for individual “descriptive” psychology as the foundation of the human sciences (Lessing 2016: 84; Kinzel 2018).

Second, Lazarus and Steinthal argued that it is possible to identify the norms of willing to action that govern social phenomena and that such phenomena, including psychology and language, are—at the same time—natural and anomic, and governed by laws and logic. Dilthey rejected any account of psychology that took it to be law governed, even retrospectively, arguing that the “nexus of life” that is the ultimate basis of the human sciences cannot be reduced to any law-governed or explanatory relationship between the self, society, and nature. However, one can find a deep tension in Dilthey’s position here, evident in the development of his work over time (Makkreel 2020: § 1.1). The account below will explore this tension and its significance for the understanding of the subject and the role of psychology in the human sciences.



3.2. COLLECTIVE STRUCTURES AND HISTORY

Lazarus and Steinthal argued that neither Johann Friedrich Herbart's individual psychology nor Georg W. F. Hegel's idealism nor Wilhelm von Humboldt's theory of culture can *independently* account for the reciprocal influence between individual and culture. The critics of the *Volksgeist*, including Dilthey, described it as a soul (*Seele*) or collective mind of a culture. For instance, the philosopher Adolf Lasson interpreted the *Volksgeist* as a "folk soul" (*Volksseele*), "without which there could not be a folk psychology" (Klautke 2013: 29). This is wrong as an interpretation of Lazarus and Steinthal in the following sense: *Völkerpsychologie* is the study of the *Volksgeist*, which develops within the "objective spirit" or "general spirit" (*Gesamtgeist*) of a culture (Klautke 2013: 19; Kluback 1956: 34). As Steinthal (1855: 388) put it, "the individual cannot be completely comprehended without regard to the mental whole (*die geistige Gesamtheit*) in which it has been created and in which it lives" (trans. Klautke 2013: 18). The aim of *Völkerpsychologie* was not to describe the development and faculties of the soul, but rather to investigate the mind or spirit of a nation with respect to the collective structures and artefacts that make it manifest.⁴

In 1860 the first edition of Lazarus and Steinthal's journal *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* was published. The first article was a manifesto written by Lazarus and Steinthal bearing the title "Introductory Thoughts on *Völkerpsychologie*, as an Invitation to a Journal for *Völkerpsychologie* and Linguistic Science."⁵ The text set out the program of the school and laid out a common set of assumptions and goals for its disparate researchers. The common assumption was that each cultural artifact or historical event is the result of prior thought, not of material causes alone, and thus cannot be regarded as mind independent. The aim of each article in the journal should be to show the relation between the phenomenon under investigation and the psychological or linguistic process of construction that lay behind it. The goal was "to investigate the historical life of peoples, in all its manifold aspects, in such a way as to account for the discovered facts from the innermost part of the mind, and thus to try to trace the facts back to their psychological roots" (Lazarus and Steinthal 1860: 1).

Völkerpsychologie began with a critical analysis of Johann Friedrich Herbart's psychological and epistemological views. Herbart relied on an empirical account of the occurrence of representations in the subject. But from Lazarus's and Steinthal's perspective, if you stay within the description of the subject, you cannot account for how an individual *interacts with* a culture to bring about artefacts, which can then be studied scientifically.

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From the viewpoint of *Völkerpsychologie*, Herbart's epistemology relied on an unfounded view that individual psychology could be associated with a universal rational psychology, which in turn is the sole ground of knowledge of culture. Lazarus and Steinthal analyzed Herbart's view as depending on the notion that the mind is a closed system in which the causes of all ideas or concepts are the brain's responses to stimuli and those responses are conditioned entirely by the independent properties of the mind.

Lazarus and Steinthal did not question Herbart's argument that the principles of variation of sensation can be given a naturalist, empirical account. But they proposed that abandoning the narrow focus on physical science for an analysis of history yields a broader picture: the mind's responses to stimuli are conditioned by the stimuli themselves and, in particular, by the material and intellectual environment in which an individual finds herself. Hence, *Völkerpsychologie* could not rest on the Herbartian view in isolation. *Völkerpsychologie* does not reject Herbart's empirical psychology entirely, but argues that it must be broadened to take into account the thesis of reciprocal influence.

In the articles Lazarus and Steinthal wrote together for the inaugural issues of the *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft*, they proposed a thesis of reciprocity between individual mind and communal structures; that is to say, historical and cultural facts and events. To use one of their examples, individuals create poetry, but poetry is also an expression of the collective imagination insofar as it expresses the borders of the collective intellectual potential of a people. Poetry stretches the borders of language, but it cannot do so beyond the recognition of the people meant to read it or it will not be effective. Lazarus and Steinthal wanted it to be possible for an idea or concept to be created in the mind of an individual that would nonetheless have a broad impact on social reality: "Wherever the power of great, general ideas spreads over many peoples, where a *single* thought seizes and dominates the genius of many nations, there psychological research will be directed not only to the behavior of the *Volksegeist*, but to the nature and the law of those societies, which goes beyond them" (Lazarus and Steinthal 1860: 6).

Lazarus and Steinthal wanted to account for the fact that certain ideas, paradigm cases of which are mathematical or poetic ideas, have a broader application and effect than the determination of a representation. They wanted psychology to account not only for the phenomenon of individual representation, but also for (i) the fact that the individual's ideas are a synthesis of facts about the world and (ii) the fact that there is an objectively determinable relationship between ideas and theories, and between ideas and societies, revealed in history. Psychological research should be directed



not at individual responses to stimuli, but rather at the interaction between the “nature and the law of those societies” in which the influence of an idea is evaluated and the ideas themselves.

To account for productive ideas, Lazarus and Steinthal turned Herbart’s analysis of representational psychology into a critique of psychological *action* as it is made manifest in history. Individual representational psychology is no longer the foundation of the description of knowledge. Instead, Lazarus and Steinthal developed a model of knowledge according to which the principles of knowledge are built from the reciprocal interaction between particular and general, between individual and collectivity, an example of which is the relation between a person and a “people” (*Volk*). This is the source of the name *Völkerpsychologie*.

In 1863, Lazarus gave a *Rektoratsrede (Über die Ideen in der Geschichte* [On Ideas in History], cited as Lazarus 1865) in which he explained how his account of ideas as productive (*schöpferisch*) and effective (*wirksam*) in history does not succumb to Hegelian dialectic or to Humboldtian⁶ empiricism. One of Lazarus’s first moves was to demonstrate how he applied the empiricist criticisms of Herbart to the Hegelian and Humboldtian philosophies of history. Lazarus wanted to identify two “violent” misuses of ideas.⁷ The first is Hegel’s theory that the individual person is only a vessel for the perfect, absolute idea.⁸ The second is Humboldt’s view that the activity of the person is a necessary and sufficient condition to achieve the being (*Dasein*) of the ideas. Lazarus argued that Hegel’s thought removes ideas too strictly from the material conditions of society, and thus it is unclear how we are to have access to them. Humboldt, on the other hand, argued that ideas have impact solely through the agency of single people, geniuses, who bring those ideas to fruition. But individuals do not control the impact of their ideas on society, because they do not have absolute control over the material conditions or other individuals in that society.

Lazarus proposed to revise Herbart’s theory in a way that would avoid the problems with Hegel and with Humboldt by giving an account of the relation between individual representational psychology and community structures. Lazarus located the contribution of reason to history in the influence of ideas on individual thought and action. Since the ideas are “partly realized” in “action and productivity,” the psychologist or philosopher can take the results of that action and productivity as the source material for analysis.⁹ The ideas themselves are not real things, independent of the person who has them (as they are for Hegel). However, ideas are made partly manifest in action: as cultural artefacts, as historical trends, and as scientific theories, for instance. The materials available to epistemology for analysis are the empirical data of experience and of recorded history. But Lazarus insisted

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on the productive (*schöpferisch*) aspect of reason: ideas could be analyzed only in their empirical manifestation in human actions and their results. Ideas in history are the ideal forms of human life: “The content of these ideas consists in all the norms of the will, in the criteria for action that keep the natural impulses of human life within certain bounds, describe goals and ends for it, and give form to individual and common human life [...]. Thus structuring ideas [*Ideen der Gestaltung*] are the true ideas in history” (Lazarus 1865: 73–5).

The word “*Gestaltung*” can mean “form,” “structure,” “configuration,” or “design.” Lazarus argued in *On Ideas in History* that recorded data and physical and cultural artifacts already possess ideal content as artifacts of human effort: the norms of the will impose a structure or form on the content of culture. That does not mean that the data of history and culture is already organized in such a way as to reveal ideal patterns or to answer, say, ethical questions. At first, the data is a bare assemblage of raw material—Lazarus’s example is of a mosaic.

Once the historical mosaic is assembled, it must be analyzed to find the ideal content that Lazarus and Steinthal argued is crystallized in it. The content of collective conceptions and *Ideen der Gestaltung* has to be brought to consciousness. Lazarus and Steinthal proposed that this is done via three methods: “compression” (*Verdichtung*), “apperception of ideas,” and “representation” (*Vertretung*).

When a person pursues a plan with “passion” and will, as Lazarus and Steinthal describe, that plan may succeed in its purpose. Someone may wish to build a steam train, found an educational institution, introduce a new recipe, or build a new theory. The process of achieving this purpose will require significant effort, thought, and planning. But once the plan is achieved, that thought is compressed (Kusch 2019: 254). As Wilhelm Jerusalem noted, Ernst Mach used ideas similar to compression in his analysis of the “economy of thought” in science (Uebel 2019: 27). Newton’s *Principia* built on the work of many before him and was a significant achievement. But a high schooler can learn the fundamental results of the *Principia* now without the need to learn the context and history: the material found in textbooks has been “compressed.” The ideal content is still there, though, and to Lazarus and Steinthal, that ideal form is the proper subject of study for *Völkerpsychologie*. Compression means, in part, that complex contents and processes can be simplified so that a subject can have access to the crucial elements without going through the entire process that it took to acquire that content. Through compression, ideas are made more widely available.

The psychological phenomena that Lazarus and Steinthal identified as the target of *Völkerpsychologie* are “apperception” and “representation.”



Apperception is “the conscious or unconscious interpretation of sensory or conceptual content in light of background beliefs” (Kusch 2019: 254). As Dilthey would argue later, Lazarus and Steinthal noted that “intuition” or “observation” are not strictly separate from conceptual framing and that experience comes already shaped by background beliefs, concepts, and analogies.¹⁰

The “interpretation of sensory or conceptual content” through apperception can be employed in “representation,” which, for both Lazarus and Steinthal, crucially involves language. Uebel presented Lazarus’s view in the following.

The first, still non-linguistic protorepresentations select only biologically important feature[s] and processes and combine in intuitions (Anschauungen) of objects and states of feeling. Later on, linguistic ideas (Vorstellungen), which possess no intuitive content of their own, were formed to represent (vertreten) these intuitions by being associated in apperception with sounds that were invariably produced in the company of the intuitions. In this process the linguistic ideas “distil and condense (verdichten) as an extract” the intuitive content [[1857] 1885: 323). It was the interplay of synchronous Vertretung and diachronous Verdichtung that led to ever higher orders of representation: repeated and iterated innumerable times this process lead first to one-word sentences and after further differentiation ... to the properly judgmental stage. (Uebel 2019: 29)

Steinthal added to this account the view that the steps of this process can be traced using logic. In his *Abriss der Sprachwissenschaft* (Outline of Linguistic Science) (1871), Steinthal argued that while expression can be viewed as a natural, biological phenomenon—one that does not follow *a priori* laws or principles—it is nonetheless true that the use of language to express and to represent can be captured logically after the fact (see also Steinthal 1855).

Revealing the content of apperception and compression is a way to show how the mind (*Geist*) is active in experience. And tracing the steps employed in judgment, expression, and representation becomes a *logical* enterprise for *Völkerpsychologie*, one that serves as a way to mediate between “ideas of form” (*Ideen der Gestaltung*) and the manifestations of culture: institutions, achievements, languages, theories. In this way, culture becomes the expression of a purpose but also of a “logic” in this sense. Here, ‘logic’ is understood as a formal process of thought, not as a subject matter with a fixed content.¹¹ Thus culture is understandable as the product of a mind, but also explainable as a logical process that can be reconstructed as

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following norms and principles of the will. It is this latter claim that would bring Lazarus and Steinthal into conflict with Dilthey (see Section 3.5).

3.3. DILTHEY ON UNDERSTANDING

Wilhelm Dilthey's method of understanding (*Verstehen*), drawn from an earlier figure, Johann Gustav Droysen (Beiser 2012: 298), is based on the distinction between explanation, the characteristic method of the natural sciences, and understanding, characteristic of the human sciences—*Erklärung* and *Verstehen* (Feest 2009).¹² Explanation is the central method of the natural sciences, and it involves the familiar methods of demonstrating causes via natural laws or reducing phenomena to elements that collectively explain them. Understanding (*Verstehen*), on the other hand, involves two features: the relation between the human and the physical world, and reflection on the “fact of humanity” as it is given in the ever-changing nexus of “lived experience” (Dilthey [1910] 2002).

To Dilthey, inner experience as present in psychology can describe what is real: he sometimes referred to descriptive psychology as “real” psychology. Descriptive psychology captures the nexus of interaction: not a relation between a “subject” and “the world,” but the single thing that *is* life or lived experience (*Erlebnis*).¹³

We begin from a complex experience that involves not only inner experience, but also the engagement of others and the world, and frameworks that overlie that experience. The point of descriptive psychology is to uncover the immediately given certainties of inner experience, which are distinct from the more complex phenomena in which they are engaged and revealed.¹⁴ Descriptive psychology is thus a way of understanding the fundamental, given inner experiences that are the foundation of all experience. Because inner experience is not derived or constructed, but immediately given, it is a certainty that can serve as the foundation of our knowledge in the human sciences.

According to this reading, the role of hermeneutics in Dilthey is to *reveal*, not solely to *interpret*, inner experience. For instance, when we use the categories of “subject” and “object,” these refer to *elements* of inner experience that are given to us immediately. It is true that they correspond to constructed categories, but those constructions are only the way we have chosen to present the subjective and objective features of experience.

This reading of Dilthey may shield him from the charge, which he faced from neo-Kantians, of relying on unscientific psychological methods, including introspection. It is certainly true that bare, unallied introspection would be a poor foundation for the human sciences. But one would hope, on his behalf, that this is not Dilthey's method. That would involve arguing



that we commune with our own inner experience via introspection and then attempt to project what we learn—without any reasoning independent of it—onto the world of culture.

Taking a more sympathetic reading of Dilthey, a world of culture emerges, and we learn through descriptive psychology, and reflective judgment in particular, how it has developed from our own subjectivity. Once that has been done, we can reconstruct the cultural nexus from the psychic nexus: “an account of how the objects of the sociohistorical world are themselves constituted by psychological forces” (Kinzel 2018: 358).

3.4. DILTHEY AND THE *VOLKSgeist*

From this perspective, we can understand why Dilthey would have judged the *Volksgeist* of Lazarus and Steinthal to be “unscientific.” The founding idea of the *Volksgeist* is that culture depends on human action and that human activity and human experience in turn depend on the development of culture. Possibly influenced by Wilhelm Waitz, Dilthey argued that the *Volksgeist* has no scientific basis: only individuals are real agents, real subjects.¹⁵

The starting point of scientific reflection, for Lazarus and Steinthal, is the artefacts and achievements of a culture. They are undeniable as cultural facts, but the scientific question is: what made them possible? There are facts that can be understood and explained only as the result of *collective action*, including collective preparation of the means of action. For instance, a language might develop over time and might crystallize the ways a community has come to represent or express things.

These means of expressing or representing the world come about in communal activity. But they can be derived logically after the fact. And this logical reasoning allows us to identify what is subjective and what is objective—but the difference, for Lazarus and Steinthal, is that “subjective” can include a *collective* subjectivity. Individuals do not achieve culture on their own: they require communal life for their achievements. Lazarus and Steinthal explained this through a subjectivity that cannot be reduced to the individual, but rather expresses the *subjective* conditions for cultural achievements, which require the participation of more than the individual.

Dilthey would agree that cultural experience is not already given with subjective and objective neatly distinguished: part of the aim of his methods of reflection and articulation is to distinguish the two. The difference between Dilthey and *Völkerpsychologie* is that Dilthey required articulation to ascribe subjectivity only to the inner experience of the individual, whereas Lazarus and Steinthal allowed for subjectivity to include cultural conditions for subjective actions that are communal or collective.

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Those conditions arise naturally in the interactions between people—but, nonetheless, they can be reconstructed using logical reasoning. Lazarus and Steinthal proposed a science of subjectivity that broadens the scope of the “subject” to encompass not only individual experiences and actions but also collective structures. It appeals to cultural facts and the structural relationships they make manifest.

Lazarus and Steinthal employed the transcendental method: beginning with a fact and tracing its conditions. The process of tracing those conditions distinguishes subjective from objective conditions of experience and knowledge. We understand subjectivity only through this transcendental process. For Lazarus and Steinthal, subjectivity is revealed in the common world of culture, and that world cannot be reduced to fundamental “inner experiences.” Rather, subjectivity is whatever functions of expression and representation, for instance, are found to be at the origin of culture. This approach is a point of continuity between Steinthal and Cassirer (see Patton forthcoming and 2015a).

Lazarus and Steinthal did not reject psychology as a way of identifying subjective action, but they argued that any such action should be understood as the origin of a process that results in objectification or in cultural achievement generally. The subject is known through its deeds, not through reflection on an individual person’s experience: and if subjective action requires collective action, then there are collective subjects. Or, at least, there are ways that subjects can be understood properly only in relation to collective facts or structures.

From this perspective, while *Völkerpsychologie* focused on finding collective cultural ideal structures, Dilthey instead focused on finding the ground of culture in the individual experience of the sociohistorical subject. Both Dilthey and *Völkerpsychologie* require revealing or articulating the subject of knowledge and its role in the constitution of objects and culture.

The Marburg neo-Kantian school would take up this question and, rejecting the psychological approach, argue that the ideal structures of *Völkerpsychologie* are structures of objectivity.¹⁶

3.5. EXPLANATORY AND DESCRIPTIVE METHODS

3.5.1. *Völkerpsychologie*

Lazarus and Steinthal were able to parlay a reinterpretation of Herbart’s insight that individual psychology alone is not a good basis of epistemology or even of psychology itself into a theory that evaluates the reciprocal determination of history and psychology. For *Völkerpsychologie*, ideas, in



their manifestation in individual psychology, are productive of history, of theories, and of human culture in general. The proper method in epistemology is to demonstrate how ideas are determined by the individual, but also how the individual determines ideas through her influence on history and even on theory.

Lazarus and Steinthal developed a theory of intellectual history according to which cultural structures can be evaluated using rational criteria, since they are produced by reasoning. However, as we saw, Lazarus and Steinthal were concerned as well with the question of how to divorce historical analysis from the study of the psychology of the individual subject.¹⁷ Individual psychology constrains conceptual analysis to a description of psychological processes. Locating intellectual history in an analysis of collective cultural structures such as language allows for evaluating the impact of ideas in a broader context than individual psychological processes.

For Lazarus and Steinthal, the goal of analyzing structures (*Gestaltungen*) is to identify the structuring ideas (*Ideen der Gestaltung*) that give rise to them. The structure itself, then, is the part of nature that we learn about through analysis. Assuming that we have given a sufficiently complete account of the structuring ideas, the resulting structure *is* the real thing described by the idea. For instance, if an architect plans a building, then the building itself is the partial realization of the architect's idea. Insofar as the building instantiates the idea, by conforming to the architect's plan, the building is the realization of the structuring idea. (Building could be seen as an example of compression: the building is a physical, easily observable manifestation of a complex plan.) Being a realization of a structuring idea becomes part of the determination of the building as an object.

The tradition of *Völkerversychologie* developed a method of:

1. recording *facts* about culture (myth, language, art, science);
2. tracing the *origin* of those facts in an interaction between humans, culture, and the material world;
3. finding the *logic* embodied by the process of deriving facts from experience by means of inferences and processes, material and ideal—this logic is made manifest in structuring ideas or ideas of structure (*Ideen der Gestaltung*).

Understanding culture requires all three of these elements. Importantly, basic psychological and linguistic phenomena—for both Lazarus and Steinthal—are independent of the logic used to explain them. Lazarus and Steinthal saw human actions and achievements as evidence for the development of a particular kind of collective process, describable by logic after the fact.

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It's crucial, here, to understand the role of *artefacts* and *achievements* for Lazarus and Steinthal. We can have knowledge of a play, poem, theory, or philosophical argument by recording its occurrence and its properties, as a fact and as an artefact of culture. That is the first step of their method of analysis.

The second step shows—using facts as evidence—that this achievement could not have come about absent the participation of others in the culture. Moreover, many achievements depend on *previous* achievements. New scientific theories build on standing results. Understanding the contribution a scientist has made with a new theory requires understanding the previous ones on which it builds to be able to determine what is new. This second step is the one that depends on law-governed reasoning about what can be done based on what.

Thus, the third step—tracing the logic that gives rise to the achievement—requires showing how an individual builds on cultural structures and achievements. For instance, Edmund Hillary's summit of Everest would not have taken place without the access he had to Indigenous Sherpa knowledge of the mountain, through his climbing partner Tenzing Norgay. Norgay himself called on hundreds and even thousands of years of Indigenous knowledge of Everest, not merely his own experience of the mountain.

It is still true that Norgay and Hillary are the first on record to reach the summit of Everest. But understanding their achievement requires knowing how they employed Indigenous and Western techniques and knowledge as well as what they may have done differently from others. One may say: "But then their particular achievement—once we've understood how it goes beyond what they took from their cultures—is individual, not an element of a *Volksgeist*." That disregards the fact that climbers to this day study Norgay's and Hillary's techniques. They involve themselves in learning how the summit of Everest was reached and in incorporating those methods into their own. And these techniques have been built into subsequent approaches to mountaineering. Even as individuals transcend the *Volksgeist*, their particular way of transcending becomes part of the *Volksgeist*.

The *Volksgeist* of Lazarus and Steinthal is not independent of the material progress of culture: its nature, not just its manifestation, depends on the historical and material conditions that obtain. The *Volksgeist* is also not universal. It develops from the cultural conditions in a particular society and time. Understanding the *Volksgeist* does not depend on grasping an ideal entity, expressing a universal logic independent of the world of matter. Revealing the *Volksgeist* requires understanding the interaction between collective, cultural processes, material facts, and individual psychology in understanding how an artefact or event came about. Doing that requires



tracing the logic of a particular achievement in order to identify the structure of the ideas made manifest in that achievement.

Dilthey's criticism of the scientific basis of *Völkerpsychologie* comes more into focus in this context.¹⁸ We might ask: What are the constraints on the analysis of the *Volksgeist*? What determines its location in a particular society or region, and what natural or psychological laws govern its development? What is the evidence for these laws?¹⁹

Dilthey, Lazarus, and Steinthal all tried to relate psychological processes in the individual to broader social phenomena and structures. Dilthey appealed to individual psychology as a foundation for the human sciences and for understanding as a method. Lazarus and Steinthal argued that "collective" structures can make manifest the relations between individuals and the *Gesamtgeist* or collective mind.²⁰ Both encounter tensions between the irrational elements introduced into their systems by locating *Erlebnis* or the *Volksgeist* in individual psychology and the attempt to give a "scientific" explanation using natural law.

The "norms" or laws of society, which are key to the methods of Lazarus and Steinthal, are revealed only in action that is the result of human will. In this way, *Völkerpsychologie* relies on a psychological account, but one that includes appeal to collective structures or forms that make it possible to act based on a plan, principle, or idea. Those structures or forms (*Ideen der Gestaltung*) are embedded in artefacts of culture, and we can find their meaning by engaging in reflection that reveals the compression of ideas in them as well as the ways in which the artefacts are manifestations of human plans and purposes.

3.5.2. Dilthey on Descriptive Psychology

One of the most significant elements of Dilthey's approach developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is his distinction between descriptive and explanatory psychology (Feest 2007; Damböck 2016, 2020). In the 1880s and 1890s, Dilthey was steadfast in arguing that the psychology that is the foundation of the human sciences must be a descriptive or "real" psychology, rather than one based on explanation. The differences between Dilthey, Lazarus, and Steinthal partly hinge on their view of whether psychology should involve methods of explanation as well as description. However, there are tensions on this score. Recognition of these tensions may have contributed to the evolution of Dilthey's approach over time.

There is some disagreement among recent interpreters of Dilthey's work over whether he is a methodological holist (Patton 2015b; Šuber 2009) or whether his project is epistemological and foundational (Kinzel 2018;

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Lessing 2016; Feest 2007). The supporters of the methodological holist reading emphasize Dilthey's account of the cooperation between the human sciences and his remarks to the effect that the unity of the nexus of life makes it impossible to reduce knowledge to any one perspective. Most poignantly, Dilthey argued, "it is clear that the human sciences and natural sciences cannot be logically divided into two classes by means of two spheres of facts formed by them" ([1910] 2002: 103).

Defenders of the reading that Dilthey was engaged in a foundational, epistemological project emphasize his remarks—which are certainly there!—that psychology (and anthropology) are the basis of all the human sciences; that "inner experience" provides "immediate certainty" about its contents; and that the methods of articulation and reflection reveal the basis for the constitution of objects of experience and knowledge. As Kinzel noted: "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" (2018: 350).

Kinzel (2018: 348) emphasized Dilthey's descriptive psychology as developed in his earlier works from the 1880s and 1890s. That psychology emphasizes the "articulation" of the functions of the "psychic nexus," which is the totality of inner and outer experience (2018: 352). Dilthey defended the following claims in his early works (as elaborated here by Kinzel 2018):

- a) The psychic nexus articulates its functions.
- b) The psychic nexus articulates representations of the contents of experience.
- c) The psychic nexus articulates representations of itself (as a content of inner experience).
- d) These representations are valid because psychic structure is universal.

In Dilthey's words,

Psychological 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. ([1894] 2010: 148)



Descriptive psychology does not begin from the assumption of a “subject” who has experience of “objects.” Rather, the psychic nexus involves experience from within—“inner experience”—and experience of outer phenomena, which are given as a whole or totality, not in separation from each other. Achieving knowledge of the “subject” requires working to articulate the representation of that nexus itself (Kinzel’s step *c* above).

The key is that articulation involves the drawing of connections between elements of systems, which are part of “the overall given nexus.” Those connections do not result in law-governed descriptions of how historical events result from psychological phenomena. Rather, sociohistorical phenomena are *epistemically accessible* from the perspective of the articulation of inner experience (Kinzel 2018: § 2). The aim of that articulation is not to arrive at causal explanations of sociohistorical phenomena, but rather to understand the connections between them; that is, to articulate the relationships within the psychic nexus.

Feist (2007) and Kusch (2019: 261) noted that Dilthey’s criticisms of explanatory psychology in the 1890s may be aimed in part at *Völkerpsychologie* (as well as at his well-known target, English historian William Henry Buckle). As we saw above, the *Volksggeist* or *Volkssseele* involves positing collective forms or structures that are intended to demonstrate how sociohistorical phenomena are made manifest as products of human willing and action. Dilthey likely saw this as of a piece with explanation in the natural sciences: taking “artefacts” of culture, as Lazarus and Steinthal did, as evidence of how events were made possible and how they happened.

In his 1894 essay criticizing “explanative” or “explanatory” psychology as the foundation of the human sciences, Dilthey remarked that a science based on explanation “is one that subsumes a phenomenal domain to a causal system by means of a limited number of univocally determined elements that are the constituents of the system” (in [1924] 2010: 113; see Damböck 2020: § 2). Descriptive psychology, on the other hand, always sees the phenomena as part of the nexus of life itself and does not provide explanations that reduce a system to its constituent elements. As a method of understanding, it is appropriate to the human sciences but not the natural sciences.

But if Dilthey intends the method of “articulation,” taken as an epistemic project, to be fundamental to the human sciences, then he has a problem similar to the one he diagnoses in Lazarus and Steinthal. If Dilthey were able to make a program of drawing all the elements of culture from individual psychology work, then he would show, at the same time, that we can demonstrate how culture is built from a process based on a description of more fundamental elements. No matter how much Dilthey may have insisted

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that because the “psychic nexus” cannot be reduced to anything more fundamental, this is not a form of explanation—it *would be*, nonetheless. These methods would be, properly speaking and in Dilthey’s own terms, methods of *explanation*, where the “univocally determined elements” of inner experience are taken as the explanans of more complex phenomena.

If psychology is to be the ground of the human sciences and if the fundamental method of the human sciences is understanding (*Verstehen*), then psychology cannot be the independent epistemic ground of all the other results of the human sciences. That would make the fundamental method of the human sciences *explanation*, not understanding—despite Dilthey’s best efforts to argue that they are not. To be clear, I am not saying that Dilthey *argued* that his foundation of the human sciences in psychology is explanatory. I am saying that if Dilthey really was claiming that valid knowledge is based on articulation of inner experience, then his methods were those of explanation: specifically, the constitution of a complex domain from immediately given parts. Dilthey’s psychology would resemble Carnap’s constitution system, not Droysen’s history.

Nonetheless, it *is* true that Dilthey saw psychology (and by extension the account of inner experience) as a foundation of the human sciences (Lessing 2016; Kinzel 2018). Lessing put it this way: “As is well known, psychology (and anthropology) take on a special function in Dilthey’s philosophy of the human sciences: it is the fundamental science of the human sciences” (Lessing 2016: 84, my translation).

In my view, this is not a matter to be decided by choosing rival readings of Dilthey. Rather, it is crucial to note that Dilthey seems to have recognized this tension in his own approach and to have changed his mind over time. Kinzel and Feest focused on the early writings of the 1880s and 1890s. Those who emphasized the methodological holism of Dilthey’s approach (Patton 2015b; Šuber 2009) emphasized later works, including *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences* of 1910 (Dilthey [1910] 2002). In this work, Dilthey explicitly argued that the human sciences cannot be reduced to any one domain and that there is no fundamental distinction between the human and the natural sciences in terms of the facts dealt with by each. In my view, then—and this is consistent with the account in Makkreel (2020: § 1.1)—Dilthey’s position evolved over time.

Dilthey seems to have recognized the tension between his commitment to the view that individual psychology is the fundamental science of the *Geisteswissenschaften* and his argument that individual experience is itself given only as part of a more fundamental psychic nexus, which is part of an even broader “nexus of life.” There are two problems here. First, individual psychology cannot be meaningful in isolation from the psychic nexus—on



Dilthey's own terms. If we require methods other than individual psychology to even identify the "individual" within the nexus, in what sense is individual psychology "fundamental"? Second is the problem identified above. If the results of individual psychology are intended as the basis of the constitution of knowledge, how is that not a form of explanation?

The methods of *Verstehen* (understanding) involve the *entire* process of tracing back a sociohistorical nexus to its ground in experience. But they also involve emphasizing the *connections between* elements of that nexus, not just the constitution of one set of elements based on another.²¹ *Verstehen* requires much more than a ground, or foundation: *Verstehen* requires understanding how and why articulation and reflection, for instance, fit into a larger framework, which is not reducible to individual psychology.

Saying that one science is the most fundamental science of the *Geisteswissenschaften* is not to say that individual psychology can function as the epistemic ground of all the results of the human sciences, independently of all the other human sciences. Even recognizing an "individual" who is capable of having "inner experience" requires analysis of immediately given experience: the distinction between subjective and objective is not immediately given, as Dilthey himself noted. It is key to notice that all the other human sciences are significant and that they are necessary in drawing out the implications of what we learn from descriptive psychology—and even in identifying the "subject" of psychology itself.

It is significant, however, that when faced with the tensions described above, Dilthey did not abandon his position that psychology is the psychology of the *individual*. Instead, he retained his preference for individual psychology and simply emphasized anew the cooperation of the human sciences and the irreducible holism of the nexus of life. Dilthey still rejected the idea, familiar to him from *Völkerpsychologie*, that sociohistorical categories broader than the individual might be meaningful in psychological reasoning.

3.6. CONCLUSION: POSTERITY

The differences between the Marburg School (exemplified by Cassirer and Cohen) and the Southwest School (Windelband, Rickert) trace two paths for the philosophy that came afterward (Friedman 2000). Cohen, Cassirer, Windelband, and Rickert were, in some ways, responding to the nineteenth-century exchanges between Dilthey, Lazarus, and Steinthal.

The difference between *Völkerpsychologie* and Dilthey was consequential to the development of nineteenth- and even twentieth-century philosophy. Hermann Cohen was affiliated with Lazarus and Steinthal at first, but then converted their analysis—beginning with the facts of culture and tracing

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their logical conditions—to a Kantian analysis of the transcendental subject (Edgar 2020; Köhnke 2001). Recent and classic scholarship on Rudolf Carnap’s *Aufbau* has interpreted the work as responding to Cohen’s methods, via Bruno Bauch (Richardson 1998, 2003; Friedman 2006), and Dilthey’s analysis, via Hans Freyer and his significant works including the *Theorie des objektiven Geistes* (Tuboly, forthcoming; Gabriel 2004; DeWulf 2017; Damböck 2012).

The reception of Lazarus’s and Steinthal’s work at times turned their sociohistorical views on *Völker* into racist theory. Kusch (2019) has shown in devastating detail how Richard Thurnwald turned the analysis of *Völkerpsychologie* into a focus on “races and personalities” rather than social institutions and histories and how “Willy Hellpach in his 1938 book *Introduction to Völkerpsychologie* sought to make the field compatible with Nazi ideology” (Kusch 2019: 263; see Klautke 2013: Ch. 3). Steizinger (2020) has detailed the influence of both Dilthey and *Völkerpsychologie* on the conservative and, later, National Socialist sympathizer, Erich Rothacker.²²

On the positive side, the greatest exponents of something like Lazarus’s and Steinthal’s methods are Ernst Cassirer, Georg Simmel, and Gilbert Simondon.²³ Cassirer’s symbolic forms and his analysis in terms of “functions” do not require a Kantian transcendental subject. Rather, Cassirer looked at the conditions for objectivization, but within a context of a broader analysis of the facts of culture. This is superficially similar to Dilthey, except that Cassirer rejected Dilthey’s foundation in inner experience. Cassirer’s argument that there is a “logic” of the cultural sciences has clear similarities to positions in Steinthal (Cassirer [1942] 2000; Patton 2015a), and Cassirer’s analysis of language is indebted to Steinthal as well (Cassirer 1942; Patton forthcoming).²⁴

Kusch (2019: 251) identified a “strong” program of *Völkerpsychologie*, identified by “methodological neutrality and symmetry; causal explanation of beliefs based on causal laws; a focus on groups, interests, tradition, culture, or materiality; determinism; and a self-referential model of social institutions.” Kusch cited as adherents to the strong program Georg Simmel, Emil Wohlwill, Hermann Cohen, and Wilhelm Windelband—though Kusch (2019: § 5) showed that Simmel did not succeed in his attempts to build on the strong program and that he was often critical of Lazarus and, especially, Steinthal.²⁵

Gilbert Simondon cited Lazarus and Steinthal in his histories of psychology (2015: 111–2). While he is often considered a philosopher of technology, Simondon’s works *L’individu et sa genèse physico-biologique* (1964) and *L’individuation psychique et collective* (1989) focus instead on the process of individuation and the ways the individual depends on the collective—both central concerns of Lazarus and Steinthal. Moreover, Simondon’s genetic,



biological account of the origins of individuality and conscious experience find echoes in Steinthal's and Lazarus's work. While other, more direct influences on Simondon were likely more decisive, he should certainly be considered among those whose work deals with questions central to *Völkerpsychologie* and illuminates those questions. Similarly, the work of Wilfrid Sellars on collective intentionality and collective, communal structures might be read in connection with the *Völkerpsychologie* movement.²⁶

Overall, however, the differences between Dilthey, Lazarus, and Steinthal are less consequential than their similarities. While Dilthey rejected the causal or law-governed elements in Lazarus and Steinthal, and while *Völkerpsychologie* rejected the individual psychology of Dilthey, they each constructed sociohistorical accounts of subjectivity. Each saw the self as indistinguishable from the sociohistorical nexus in which a person lives, and each saw history and anthropology as fundamental to capturing the facts of culture. The fundamental framework for the analysis of how culture is related to understanding owes much to their work and influence.

3.7. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many interlocutors have enriched this chapter, and I am very grateful for their contributions. First among them must be Adam Tamas Tuboly, who provided insightful comments on a draft and commissioned the work. Katherina Kinzel, Martin Kusch, and Thomas Uebel made invaluable contributions to the revision of the chapter, making suggestions that hit on key issues and resulted in significant improvements, for which I am very grateful. An anonymous referee for the volume made valuable comments. An early version of the research on *Völkerpsychologie* was done for my dissertation (Patton 2004), although it is now in a very different form.

NOTES

- 1 For Cassirer's distinction between the sciences, see Capeillères (2007).
- 2 Sometimes Germanized as Moritz and Heymann.
- 3 I am very grateful to Martin Kusch for providing the historical context in this paragraph (references to the Historical School and to the context of *Völkerpsychologie*). See Chapter 2 of Kluback (1956) for more detail on the relationship between Dilthey and the Historical School.
- 4 I am grateful to Martin Kusch for clarification of this passage (remaining errors are mine).
- 5 "Einleitende Gedanken über Völkerpsychologie, als Einladung zu einer Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft" in Lazarus and Steinthal (1860: 1–73). All translations from this work are my own except where noted.

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- 6 Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) was a humanist scholar known for, among other subjects, his contributions to linguistics and to aesthetic theory. He founded the Humboldt University in Berlin (Uecker 1990). The foundation of Steinthal’s linguistic study was in Humboldt’s linguistic theory (Lassahn 1995).
- 7 “It should arrest the critic’s attention compellingly that the great force of ideas is equally strongly emphasized in two such fundamentally different points of view as Hegel’s and Humboldt’s. Certainly one of the most important ways that ideas are determined is in relationship to acting and productive people, to the individuals who appear to have them. However, whereas in Hegel conscious or unconscious generality comes into the foreground, with Humboldt [*it is*] personal individuality. For the former [*Hegel*], the individual is only a medium [...] for the latter [*Humboldt*] the individual is the higher expression, the true life of the idea; for the former the expression: ‘we do not have ideas, but they have us’ is common; for the latter the doctrine is that only in the productive personality do ideas attain a productive existence” (Lazarus 1865: n. 41).
- 8 Thus, readings of Lazarus and Steinthal that emphasize the Hegelian elements are, in their view, one-sided. While the term “*Volksgeist*” is certainly suggestive of Hegel, and while Lazarus and Steinthal do incorporate some of Hegel’s notions, they are not, ultimately, Hegelian idealists. Their view is intended, instead, to be based on the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) and on secure scientific methods. I am grateful to Thomas Uebel for emphasizing this key point.
- 9 “Ideas in history are the ideas that are *effective* in the lives and activities of men, that is, of individuals and peoples, and thus in the life of humanity. They are not transcendental powers found outside the human soul, which somehow affect it from outside, but are actual [*wirkliche*] ideas, that is, ideas that appear within people as acts of their mental agency. They are produced, shaped, and developed within the human soul, and are partly realized in action and productivity” (Lazarus 1865: 73).
- 10 See Damböck (2016) for a discussion of Dilthey and Steinthal as exponents of German empiricism.
- 11 See Patton (2004: Ch. 1) for a discussion of *Erkenntnislogik* and *Erkenntnistheorie*. Thanks are due to Katherina Kinzel for encouraging clarification of this passage.
- 12 During the 1860s, Dilthey wrote several drafts of an article called “Contra Lazarism et Lazaristas, Millium, etc.” explicitly against Lazarus’s (and Steinthal’s) methods. According to Kluback (1956: 36), “this article that was never published furnished the foundation for his first published systematic work,” *Introduction to the Human Sciences*.
- 13 Dilthey’s *Erlebnis* has been compared with similar ideas from phenomenology. I am grateful to Adam Tuboly for emphasizing this point.
- 14 “Descriptive psychology seeks to recapture the intrinsic structure of inner experience and preserves its immediate givenness” (Kinzel 2018: 353).
- 15 “At the core of Waitz’s history of civilization stands the individual person: opposing romantic ideas about *Volksgeist*, he insists that ‘there is no agent, real and substantive, which can be considered as the spirit of a people or of humanity; individuals alone are real’ (Waitz 1863: 324). Dilthey would later agree with this plea for the crucial role of individuality” (Martinelli 2018: § 5).



- 16 Edgar (2020: § 6) explored the move from Cohen’s early work with Lazarus and Steinthal to his later focus on objectivity.
- 17 Steinthal focused, in much of his work, on the interaction between humans as natural beings, their language, and how language grounds culture. Linguistic expression, for Steinthal, is fundamental to grasping the world in logical categories. But the expressive use of language is outside logic: it is an entirely natural phenomenon (see Patton forthcoming and 2015a for discussion).
- 18 Thanks are due to Martin Kusch for raising this important point.
- 19 Adam Tuboly’s suggestions motivated several of these questions.
- 20 In this sense, it is wrong to see in Lazarus and Steinthal a quasi-idealist method, as Thomas Uebel has emphasized.
- 21 As Katherina Kinzel has emphasized to me (personal communication), this is already true of descriptive psychology.
- 22 Unfortunately, Steinthal himself engaged in discourse about “primitive” cultures and ethnic inferiority. And the introduction that Lazarus and Steinthal composed for their first journal issue engages in triumphalist thinking about the historical priority of the Germanic peoples (1865: 7).
- 23 Kusch (2019) identified most of the posterity of *Völkerpsychologie* and drew clear connections to the impact of their work. I was reminded of Simondon’s importance by a public remark by Grant Maxwell.
- 24 Ikonen (2011) cited the influence of *Völkerpsychologie* on Cassirer’s analysis of culture, and Kalmar (1987) argued that their work was influential on the modern concept of ‘culture’ generally. Luft (2015) analyzed Cassirer’s notion of “culture.”
- 25 Klautke (2013) analyzed more of the critical and sympathetic reaction to Lazarus and Steinthal.
- 26 I am grateful to Adam Tuboly for raising this latter point.

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