

# In Defence of *Verstehen* and *Erklären*

## Wilhelm Dilthey's *Ideas Concerning a Descriptive and Analytical Psychology*

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ABSTRACT. Wilhelm Dilthey's essay of 1894, *Ideas Concerning a Descriptive and Analytical Psychology*, is the *locus classicus* for the distinction between 'understanding' and 'explanation', or *Verstehen* and *Erklären*, in the 19th-century German tradition of hermeneutics and the *Geisteswissenschaften*. This article discusses the distinction Dilthey draws there between 'explanatory' psychology, based on subsumption of the behaviour of individuals under general laws, and 'interpretive', or 'descriptive and analytical', psychology, based on disclosure of the uniqueness of individual case-histories. It defends his conception against the objections of the Neo-Kantian philosophers Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert and the experimental psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus, as well as neo-positivist writers such as Theodore Abel. The article also argues more generally that Dilthey's dichotomy of 'spirit' and 'nature' still articulates a fundamental methodological difference between the sciences, despite our contemporary recognition of the importance of interpretation in both the natural and human sciences.

KEY WORDS: descriptive psychology, *Geisteswissenschaften*, hermeneutics, understanding

Wilhelm Dilthey's essay of 1894, *Ideas Concerning a Descriptive and Analytical Psychology*, is the *locus classicus* for the distinction between 'understanding' and 'explanation', or *Verstehen* and *Erklären*, in the 19th-century German tradition of hermeneutics and the *Geisteswissenschaften*.<sup>1</sup>

Over the 20th century, this distinction came under fire from a number of directions. During the first decade of the century, the German Neo-Kantian philosophers Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert each argued that while Dilthey was right to differentiate the natural from the human or 'cultural' sciences (*Kulturwissenschaften*), he was wrong to ground this difference on the notion of an interpretive role for psychology in historical studies, for in their view psychology belonged only with the natural sciences

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and could never capture what they saw as the intrinsic normative 'validity' (*Geltung*) of cultural forms.<sup>2</sup> In the 1940s and 1950s, under the influence of logical positivism, Carl Hempel (1942/1994), Theodore Abel (1948/1976) and Ernest Nagel (1961, pp. 480–491) maintained that *Verstehen* could not be used to express any fundamental methodological difference between the natural sciences and the human sciences: *Verstehen*, in their view, represented little more than a heuristic 'cup of coffee' prior to the real scientific work of nomological explanation. More recently, writers such as Mary Hesse (1972/1980), Richard Rorty (1980), Karl-Otto Apel (1979/1984) and Jürgen Habermas (1981/1984) have argued that Dilthey's distinction remains unworkably 'metaphysical' and 'dualistic', at odds with our increasing awareness of an almost equal content of interpretation in the natural sciences and of the dependence of the latter disciplines on complex symbolic constructs with often quite indeterminate explanatory capabilities.

In this article, I wish to argue that, despite these criticisms, Dilthey's dichotomy still retains considerable importance and validity today. Dilthey's Neo-Kantian and positivist critics largely misunderstood his conception of the role of interpretation and psychology in the human sciences, while those writers who today criticize the dichotomous aspect of *Verstehen* and *Erklären* often overlook Dilthey's own understanding of elements of commonality between the sciences. I wish to suggest that Dilthey's two concepts of *Geist* and *Natur* are not 'dualistic' in any especially objectionable sense: Dilthey correctly and instructively paints a portrait of two domains of science that complement and overlap with each other and yet still differ from one another in key respects. One of the best ways of demonstrating this is to examine his account of the art of interpretation in psychology in the essay *Ideas Concerning a Descriptive and Analytical Psychology*.

### **'Descriptive and Analytical Psychology'**

Dilthey's essay continues the argument of his earlier major work of 1883, the *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, or *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (hereafter *Einleitung*) (GS I). It is directed principally as a critique of those dominant schools in the 19th century that saw psychology as oriented to the discovery of laws of behaviour through induction from experience, based on hypotheses and deductive principles. The classical formulation of this deductive-nomological conception appeared in J.S. Mill's *The System of Logic*, and continued in the work of associative psychologists such as Johannes Herbart, Hippolyte Taine and Herbert Spencer. According to Dilthey, with the exception of a few pioneering figures such as William James (GS V, pp. 167, 177), these men wrongly began by assuming certain combinations of sensory particles that had to be subsumed under a few basic but empty concepts such as 'stimulus' and

'response', 'drive', 'instinct', and so on. They thereby destroyed the original unity of the subject-matter, only to reconstruct this unity artificially. This is what Dilthey calls 'explanatory psychology' (*erklärende Psychologie*):

Explanatory psychology, which today lays claim to such a great degree of labour and interest, erects a system of causal connections which claims to render intelligible all occurrences of psychic life. It attempts to explain the constitution of the psychic world according to its components, forces and laws, as precisely as physics and chemistry explain the corporeal world. . . . Explanatory psychology seeks to order the phenomena of psychic life under a causal system by means of a limited number of univocally determined elements. (GS V, p. 139/88)

Even when it claims to eschew metaphysical assumptions, explanatory psychology still covertly presupposes notions of uniformity and regularity that it tacitly borrows from the natural sciences (GS V, p. 158/91). Furthermore, as soon as it tries to give content to its preliminary concepts and hypotheses by increasing the specificity of its terms, it finds it can no longer predict behaviour univocally, and constantly encounters exceptions. Thus either its hypotheses remain abstract and uninformative, giving little sense of the uniqueness of the phenomenon at issue, or they relinquish their predictive power (GS V, pp. 169–171, 197–202).<sup>3</sup> According to Dilthey, this is precisely the point at which psychology should recognize the value of an interpretive approach oriented to disclosing the subject's unique sense of purpose and agency and general 'inner experience of life'.

Dilthey declares that interpretive psychology must proceed by 'description' (*Beschreiben*) and 'analysis' or 'articulation' (*Zergliedern*), not mechanical 'construction' (*Konstruktion*). It must describe and articulate what already possesses unity, instead of 'constructing' this unity from prior elements (GS V, p. 173). Since the total interconnectedness of psychic life already manifests itself to us in inner experience, the subject-matter of psychology already appears to us as a structured whole (*Zusammenhang*) needing only to be explicated in terms of its parts:

The goal of the study of psychic phenomena is *Zusammenhang*. This is given to us through inner experience in the relations of our agency [*Erwirken*] as something vivid, free and historical for us. It is the general precondition of our ability to perceive, think, imagine and act. The unity of a sense-impression does not derive from the sensory stimuli bound up in it; it arises from our own living unitary activity that we call *Zusammenhang*. Precisely this living synthetic process makes up the processes of our thought: comparing, joining, distinguishing, fusing, and so on. (GS V, pp. 193–194)

This does not mean interpretive psychology has no power to draw generalizations. On the contrary, it arrives at its specifications of individuality only by comparison with multiple cases. However, it does not subsume these cases under an invariant principle; it concentrates on features that are at once

typical for the actions and occurrences of each context yet different from all other contexts. This requires uncovering the role of purpose, motive and intention in the life-history of the individual and the mediation of social behaviour by language and wider symbolic structures embodied in myth, religion, custom and law, and in all the historical expressions of human mental life:

We start out from the position of the culturally developed human being. We describe the totality of his psychic life; we allow ourselves to see the chief features of this life as clearly as possible with all the aid of artistic evocation at our disposal; and we analyse as precisely as possible all the individual contextual parts of this totality. We proceed as far as possible in this process of analytical articulation; but we let that which resists analysis stand as it is. . . . We also add to this process methods of comparison, developmental history, experiment and analysis of historical products; then psychology will become the tool of the historian, the political economist, the political scientist and the theologian. (GS V, p. 157/91)

These remarks indicate Dilthey's confidence that psychology could form part of the human sciences and need not purely be consigned to the natural sciences, as the Neo-Kantian philosophers maintained. In Windelband's terminology, Dilthey believed psychology could be *either* 'nomothetic' or 'idiographic' in its methods: it could either subsume the behaviour of individuals under general physical laws or it could elicit the historical uniqueness of individual biographies through contextual comparison and typification.

Windelband and Rickert each argued, however, that psychology was not capable of addressing the normative validity of the 'thought-contents' objectified in cultural phenomena through history. In their view, it could only reduce these contents to reflections of naturalistic regularities in the subjective life of individual persons. While they recognized the limitations of naturalistic psychology and its inability to capture the important individuality of historical events, they insisted that it could not serve as part of those disciplines that studied the unique cultural meanings of human actions and utterances: it could only belong with the natural sciences, not the human sciences. Admittedly, Windelband did not hold to this view as forcefully as did Rickert. Indeed, Windelband's position on psychology in some ways coincides with Dilthey's in that in 'History and Natural Science', Windelband's inaugural lecture at Strasburg University, delivered later in the year of 1894, he, too, accepted that 'to judge by its subject, it [psychology] can only be characterized as a humanity, and in a certain sense as the foundation of all the others' (Windelband, 1894/1998, p. 11). Nonetheless, Windelband never went so far as Dilthey's much more forthright and extensively defended statement in the *Einleitung* of 1883 that psychology was to be the 'foundation' and 'first and most fundamental of the particular human sciences' (GS I, p. 84). The significance Dilthey attached to psychology in

the human sciences was well known in academic philosophical circles in Germany by the late 1880s, and it was in opposition to this that Windelband concluded his sentence in the remark above by emphasizing that psychology's 'entire procedure, its methodological arsenal, is from beginning to end that of the natural sciences' (Windelband, 1894/1998, p. 11). It was this insistence on method and mode of concept-formation rather than subject-matter as the essential criterion of distinction between the sciences which led to Rickert's asserting much more adamantly in 1899 that psychology could only belong with the natural sciences:

Certainly it cannot be denied that those empirical disciplines which do not belong to the natural sciences have to do preeminently with psychic being and that therefore in this respect the term *Geisteswissenschaft* is not directly false, but this . . . does not consider the criterion of distinction which is essential for a theory of science. For the concept of the psychological makes clear neither the fundamental difference between two different types of scientific *interest* . . . nor any appropriate logical, *formal* opposition between two different *methods* of research. (Rickert, 1899/1986, p. 29)

For the Neo-Kantians, Dilthey's subjectivist category of *Geist* had to be replaced by that of *Kultur* as the only epistemologically appropriate term: the proper study of history was to be called *Kulturwissenschaft*, not *Geisteswissenschaft*.

It should be pointed out, however, that Windelband and Rickert took a highly partial view of Dilthey's undertaking that more reflected their interests in intellectual self-distinction than a fair understanding of his position. Makkreel (1977, pp. 218–223, 274–280) and Ermarth (1978, pp. 270–292) cogently underline in this connection that the prejudices of the Neo-Kantians against interpretive psychology resulted in a significant distortion of our reception of Dilthey's thought over the 20th century. This, combined with the greater subsequent influence of Husserlian phenomenology, has meant that the true import of his intentions has been unjustly neglected. Makkreel, in particular, demonstrates how the Neo-Kantians upheld a rather dogmatic interpretation of Kant's transcendental logic which failed to see how, for Dilthey, the social-psychological factors of human experience in historical time themselves entered into the transcendental framework of human knowledge and could not be reduced to purely contingent conditions. Eschewing Rickert's strict dichotomy between objective thought-contents and subjective *Geist*, Dilthey arrived at a theory of the meaning of psychic contents which strikingly anticipates Husserl's doctrine of the 'intentionality' of consciousness. Although he was not to clarify the insight until reading Husserl's *Logical Investigations* of 1901 and subsequently corresponding with Husserl after 1905, Dilthey's early writings make clear that he did *not* regard mental expressions as reducible to empirical states of experience in the life of the subject. Cultural forms had to be understood *both* as expressions of psychic life in historical contexts *and*

as intentional contents whose 'validity' held independently of the particular experiences of their authors.

Dilthey therefore never meant to deny the normative priority of epistemology; rather, he sought to reunite epistemology with psychology in order to recover the bodily, emotive context of our knowledge. He called this context the 'psychic nexus of life' (*der psychische Zusammenhang*). In the psychic nexus, we gain understanding of ourselves and others through 'lived experience' (*Erlebnis*), and it is this inner, immediate 'lived experience' of ours, where conscious thought intimately connects with feeling and volition, that provides the condition of possibility for all further abstractive knowledge of the world. The psychic nexus therefore retains a transcendental significance for Dilthey, even as it is embedded in concrete social relations and historical conditions. As he put it in the *Einleitung*,

In the real life-process, willing, feeling and thinking are only different aspects. Thus the questions which we must address to philosophy cannot be answered by the assumption of a rigid epistemological a priori, but rather only by a developmental history proceeding from the totality of our being. (GS I, p. 51)

A second line of criticism of Dilthey stems from two sources: first, from the experimental psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus, author of a scathing attack on Dilthey in the *Zeitschrift für Psychologie* (1896); and, second, from mid-20th-century neo-positivist critics of *Verstehen* such as Carl Hempel, Ernest Nagel and, especially, Theodore Abel.

In a review of *Ideas*, Ebbinghaus (1896) maintained that naturalistic psychology was already on its way to fulfilling the kind of tasks Dilthey reserved for descriptive psychology, and consequently was in no fundamental need of reform. Echoing J.S. Mill's conviction that if certain disciplines had not yet achieved the same explanatory powers as the natural sciences, this was merely because they had yet to develop the appropriate methods, not because of any fundamental methodological difference, Ebbinghaus argued that the recent excesses of some forms of experimental psychology were no reason for jettisoning the experimental method *tout court* (pp. 204–205). A large part of this argument rested on the claim that Dilthey had not managed to do away with inductive hypothetical construction in psychology: his method of arriving at an account of the whole of the phenomenon at issue still involved the prior making of hypotheses. In a reply to Ebbinghaus of the same year, however, Dilthey pointed out that to elicit the totality of psychic life by descriptively elucidating individual parts of it and gradually relating these parts together as a whole does not essentially involve forming a hypothesis (GS V, pp. 265–303). Dilthey's descriptive psychology takes its point of departure from the sense that our lived understanding of connectedness in experience, of initial patterns, forms and purposes, is not yet an understanding of regular functional connections

between  $x$  and  $y$  but is nonetheless a definite sense of structure for us. Through its abstractions and generalizations, psychological research clarifies this sense and thereby develops general precepts of explanation. It thereby transcends the immediately given, but it is not for this reason hypothetical. A researcher's generalizations can *educe* an order that is continuous with the subject's lived experience, without ordering experience inductively under invariant constructs. It was this descriptive method of piece-by-piece explication which fundamentally distinguished Dilthey's programme from naturalistic psychology, and in these respects it again strikingly anticipates Husserl's phenomenological method.<sup>4</sup>

These remarks should also make clear why Dilthey did not regard the act of understanding as a strict 'operation', in the sense in which, for example, Theodore Abel uses this term (Abel, 1948/1976, pp. 81–92). Abel supposes that the proponents of interpretive social science uphold a 'singular form of operation which we perform whenever we attempt to explain human behaviour'. He then concludes that 'lacking the fundamental attributes of scientific method . . . *Verstehen* cannot be used to validate the assumption of a dichotomy of the sciences', although it may perform some 'auxiliary functions' such as serving as a 'source of hunches . . . in the formulation of hypotheses' which can then be established 'by means of objective, experimental, and statistical tests' (Abel, 1948/1976, pp. 81, 91). Beginning, like Hempel and Ernest Nagel, with a commitment to the unity of science and the 'covering law' model of explanation, Abel assumes that the aim of *Verstehen* was to deliver law-like propositions about human behaviour. These could be propositions such as: 'In times of economic insecurity, people seek refuge in religion'; or: 'When the harvest fails in farming districts, marriage rates decline.' He then thinks the process of understanding was meant to consist in 'internalizing the feeling-states of the subject' so as to 'verify' our explanations of observed connections between initial conditions and outcomes. We thus 'understand' a man who puts more wood on the fire in a freezing temperature because we 'know', by 'empathy', that someone who 'feels cold' will 'seek warmth'.

This construal radically misconceives the explanatory purpose of understanding for Dilthey. If Abel finds *Verstehen* lacking in the 'fundamental attributes of scientific method', this is hardly surprising—for Weber and Dilthey never intended such attributes, at least not in the naturalistic sense of 'scientific'. According to Dilthey, understanding typical social actors and historical personalities psychologically did not mean meditating on personal experience in order to ascertain a law under which to subsume these cases. To understand a psychologically interesting personality such as Martin Luther, for example, meant holistically investigating as much as possible of the unique context of his historical situation and explaining his actions in terms of this context (GS V, p. 181). It meant interpreting Luther's personal development and religious beliefs in the framework of dominant structural

changes in the society of his time and milieu. We then reach our explanation of his deeds by testing our psychological precepts against the context of his manifest utterances and becoming acquainted with the language of the period. This required critical historical analysis, not transference of our own 'feeling-states'. We then arrive at a non-nomological sense of 'explain', where our 'saying-what', our 'thick description', gives us a sufficient basis for 'saying-why'.

I now turn to the wider question of whether Dilthey's dichotomy of the sciences might be criticized for being 'dualistic' in some problematic sense.

### 'Dualism' in *Verstehen* and *Erklären*?

It has been said that the 19th-century antithesis of the *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften* is 'metaphysical' and can no longer be upheld today after the challenges to inductive empiricism posed by philosophers of the natural sciences since the 1960s such as Popper, Quine, Kuhn, Feyerabend and others (cf. Bernstein, 1983, pp. 30–49; Hesse, 1972/1980; Hiley, Bohman & Shusterman, 1991). Several critics have argued that since the natural sciences do not develop by progressive accretions of knowledge from observations but by discontinuous 'paradigm shifts' where facts are intertwined with prior theories and discursive frameworks, the difference of the sciences cannot be as simple as Dilthey's 19th-century criteria suggest. His famous slogan 'Nature we explain, psychic life we understand' (*Die Natur erklären wir, das Seelenleben verstehen wir*) (GS V, p. 144/89) now appears at odds with the involvement of many natural sciences such as biology, zoology and even physics in complex tasks of interpretation bound up with symbolic constructs that cannot be falsified by sensory data alone. Thus Richard Rorty (1980) has gone so far as to assert that the only difference between the sciences of nature and sciences of 'spirit' is that the latter take variety and discontinuity of conceptual and linguistic frameworks for granted, whereas the former do not:

To buy in on the normal science of one's day in constructing the largest possible story to tell about the history of the race is not . . . to say that physics is 'objective' in some way in which politics or poetry may not be. . . . Nature is whatever is so routine and familiar and manageable that we trust our own language implicitly. Spirit is whatever is so unfamiliar and unmanageable that we begin to wonder whether our 'language' is 'adequate' to it. Our wonder . . . is simply about whether somebody or something may not be dealing with the world in terms for which our language contains no ready equivalents. (pp. 345, 352)

However, it is difficult to see why Dilthey's 'dualism' should be inherently objectionable. Certainly his picture of the methods of the natural

sciences was not elaborate, and, like many 19th-century German literati, he tended to assimilate all natural sciences to the mechanistic principles of physics. Yet whatever the romantic origins of the language of 'spirit' and 'nature' in his discourse, a basic difference of subject-matter still remains between the sciences that his concepts rightly and properly address. Drawing from a mass of previously unpublished material now available in the German *Gesammelte Schriften*, several recent scholars of Dilthey have highlighted the subtlety of his reflections in this connection (see especially Ermath, 1978; Makkreel, 1977, 1983; Makkreel & Rodi, 1989; Riedel, 1970/1978a, 1977/1978b; Rodi, 1983). A number of points should be stressed here.

First, Dilthey did not distinguish two different classes of 'objects' (*Objekten*). He did not invoke any material distinction between different kinds of entities, as Rickert claimed (Rickert, 1899/1986, pp. 30–35). Rather, he distinguishes between two types of 'facts' (*Tatsachen*). This allows us to regard the same sensory material as relevant either to the human or natural sciences depending on whether we apprehend it in the context of either 'inner' experience of felt social meanings or 'outer' experience of the world under analytic categories (GS V, p. 248). Thus physiology studies human life, but not from the inner perspective of lived experience. Conversely, historians can study natural phenomena like the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 or the Black Forest in Germany, but not as instances of physical regularities. They study them rather as unique cultural facts, to do, say, with the earthquake's impact on Enlightenment optimism or the forest's meaning for German peasants and their folklore. This is not to say that the difference of the sciences for Dilthey inheres either in two opposed realms of being, or simply, as Windelband and Rickert maintained, in two different types of methodology or modes of forming concepts for empirical data. If the latter were true, if the difference were purely formal and epistemological, we would still be left with the question of why most physical phenomena tend to be treated under nomological constructs and most cultural phenomena under individualizing concepts. Dilthey points out that there must still be something in the nature of the *subject-matter*, the 'facts', that leads us to apply one methodology rather than another, even though this subject-matter need not be conceived in terms purely of a difference of ontological 'substance'.

Second, Dilthey did not deny the many ways in which historical understanding can make use of natural-scientific knowledge. Historians of the Black Death in the Middle Ages, for example, undoubtedly rely on modern bacteriological knowledge for their causal attributions (cf. Weber, 1922/1968, p. 215). In psychology especially, interpreters had to respect the causal experimental knowledge of explanatory psychology wherever it addressed the physical structure of our behaviour. Explanatory psychology certainly had its place; yet not when extended to the cultural context

of human life (GS I, p. 62). Dilthey already emphasized this in the *Einleitung*:

At both points of transition between the study of nature and that of the human world—i.e. where nature influences the development of the mind and where it is either influenced by or forms the passageway for influencing other minds—both sorts of knowledge always intermingle. Knowledge of the natural sciences overlaps with that of the human sciences. Because of this twofold formative influence of nature on human life, we can combine knowledge of how nature shapes human beings with insight into how it provides us with material for action. Thus an important part of grammar and of music theory is derived from our knowledge of the natural laws of sound formation. (GS I, p. 70)<sup>6</sup>

Third, Dilthey saw rightly that whatever interpretation takes place in the natural sciences, what these sciences interpret are essentially the special theoretical constructs of previous scientists, not the ordinary taken-for-granted constructs of immediate participants in society.<sup>7</sup> These special constructs may be embedded in general cultural practices and world-views, but they are not studied as such in the actual conduct of research by natural scientists. For instance, Darwin's theory of natural selection is a richly symbolic construct, deeply embedded in the heritage of modern European evolutionary thought; but it is deployed by biologists and zoologists chiefly as an analytical instrument for the investigation of natural processes: it is not itself an object of investigation. Modern biologists who analyse its symbolic construction do so chiefly with a view to improving their capacity to explain natural processes, not with an eye to the light it sheds on 19th-century intellectual change. By contrast, in the human sciences, a theory of evolution, along with wider philosophical ideas and popular beliefs, myths and images, will always be treated as the unique *ends* of study.

This brings me now to what for Dilthey is arguably the most important hallmark of the human sciences: their focus on uniqueness and particularity.

### **Uniqueness and Particularity in the Human Sciences**

The insight that the natural sciences seek general laws and uniform patterns whereas the human sciences study cultural particularities and images is usually first attributed to Wilhelm Windelband, because of his influential distinction between 'nomothetic' and 'idiographic' science. In 'History and Natural Science', Windelband (1894/1998, p. 13) proposed that where the 'nomothetic' natural sciences analyse lawful regularities, the 'idiographic' cultural sciences consider unique occurrences and *Gestalten*. Rickert (1899/1986, pp. 30–46) later criticized this distinction for setting up a realm of the general over against a realm of the particular, and pointed out that

some natural sciences, such as astronomy and biology, are also idiographic in their descriptions and classifications, while some cultural sciences, such as economics and linguistics, also assert generalizing statements and make inductive generalizations central to their methods. Implicitly, Rickert directs this objection to Dilthey as well as to Windelband.

This criticism, however, is not actually fair, either to Windelband or to Dilthey. Windelband, for one, does recognize that no nomothetic science can enunciate general laws without particular individual phenomena that first strike it as worthy of investigation, and conversely that no idiographic science can analyse individual events and forms without general criteria of explanation. As Lamiell (1998) has stressed here, 'For Windelband, the general was not something properly thought of as having nothing to do with particulars. On the contrary, the consideration of particulars is necessary in order to determine whether or not something *putatively* general in fact *is so*' (p. 30). In Windelband's words:

... the idiographic sciences require, at every step, general theses, which they can borrow in their fully correctly established form only from the nomothetic disciplines. Every causal explanation of some or other historical process requires general notions about how things take their course at all. (Windelband, 1894/1998, p. 19)

Yet the point emphasized by Dilthey and Windelband was that while some nomothetic knowledge may be necessary for the human sciences, it is not by itself *informative* for them. To say that 'all wars are caused by rivalries between powers' may be a valid historical generalization, but it is an empty uninformative one beside statements that describe individually the causes of the Thirty Years War or the causes of the First World War. The human sciences consider a different and additional sense of the general that locates universal significance *within* individual occurrences, not in some invariant concept that tries to subsume them. Dilthey especially demonstrates this point when he notes that the human sciences differ not simply in their concern with individuality *tout court* but in the specific type of *relationship* between general and particular concepts that they posit:

In the sciences of nature, the dominant goal of knowledge is uniformity; whereas in the historical world, it is a matter of singling out the individual. In our determination of particular objects, we do not proceed downwards [from a prior standard] but upwards. Historical research consists in a progressive deepening of our picture of the unique. We find in it a living relationship between the realms of the uniform and the individual. Yet it is not the singular itself but precisely this *relationship* [between singular and general] that reigns here. (GS V, p. 236, emphasis added)

Where the natural sciences subsume the particular under the general, the human sciences strive to reveal the general *in* the particular.

As several writers have remarked, this idea calls to mind a highly suggestive phrase that has been attributed to Goethe: 'The particular is ever

subordinate to the general; the general must ever accommodate the particular [*Das Besondere unterliegt ewig dem Allgemeinen; das Allgemeine hat sich ewig dem Besonderen zu fügen*]’ (quoted in Lamiell, 1998, p. 30). The idea actually has its roots in Kant’s distinction between ‘determinate’ and ‘reflective judgement’ in the *Critique of Judgement* (*bestimmende* and *reflektierende Urteilskraft*). Where for Kant the beauty of an object could not be determined by deduction from a general concept but only uniquely ‘reflectively experienced’ in aesthetic perception, so for Dilthey the universal significance of historical events could only be exhibited through the artistic presentation of their singularity. History was comparable to art in this sense, ‘because in it, as in the imagination of the artist, the universal is intuited in the particular and not . . . as in theory, abstracted from the particular and presented for its own sake’ (GS I, p. 91). Several aspects of scholarly practice illustrate this for Dilthey.

First, in all historical narratives, the significance of events depends on their internal relations to the time and place of their occurrence and the names of the participants. Thus no one event can be substituted for another in the same context of explanation without alteration of meaning. What took place in France in 1789 and 1848 may have been in both cases a ‘revolution’, but no two revolutions are the same in the way that two natural events, such as two freezings of water or two fallings of apples from trees, are the same.

Second, in historical explanation, no causal thesis can be disqualified by exceptional evidence in the same compelling way that data can falsify a hypothesis in the natural sciences. One of the best but most often misunderstood examples of this is Weber’s *Protestant Ethic* thesis. Weber himself frequently acknowledged, both in the text itself and in his ‘Anti-Critical Replies’, that not all or even the majority of Protestant cities and regions in Europe demonstrated rapid capitalist growth in the early modern period, and conversely that extensive trading and commercial activity took place in Catholic cities such as Venice and Cologne (Weber, 1904/1930, pp. 64–66). However, he rightly argued that such instances do not disqualify the thesis, because it does not assert any general law of the form, ‘Wherever *x*, there *y*’ (Weber, 1907–1911/1978, p. 29). Admittedly, few propositions in the natural sciences take such a strict form either. The majority are based only on statistical regularities; very few actually assert universal laws per se. Nonetheless, the natural sciences still essentially seek predictively reliable hypotheses that withstand significant numbers of counter-examples, whereas historical research does not simply seek to accumulate as many quantitative instances of the proposed theses as possible. Its goal is rather to illustrate the general significance that resides *within* each chosen case. Checking the conformity of one’s theses to prevailing statistical patterns certainly forms an important requirement of historical explanation, but this process is not the end of research and does not itself decide its heuristic value. Weber’s

*Protestant Ethic* thesis gains its value essentially from its demonstration of the exemplary significance of the particular kind of ‘methodical conduct of life’ he called Calvinist asceticism for the unique ‘cultural phenomenon’ we know today as modern capitalism (Weber, 1904/1930, pp. 13, 47–78, 105). This is entirely in the spirit of Dilthey’s idea of presenting the universal in the individual, the general in the particular.<sup>8</sup>

Third, forming concepts and classificatory systems in the human sciences need not, and ought not to, be strictly separated from the operation of adducing empirical instances of concepts. By contrast, in the natural sciences, it would constitute *petitio principii* to presuppose the characteristics of the phenomena to be demonstrated by a certain category in one’s original construction of this category. Although *petitio principii* can occur in the human sciences too, there this circularity can be turned into a virtue, because there our orientation is constantly to tailor our general terms to each particular phenomenon in order to release the uniqueness of each individual case. Scholars of the human world presuppose what they seek to demonstrate in a way that can be legitimate and fruitful, and only correct their anticipations as they go along, in a way that is not admissible in the natural sciences:

Whenever scientific thought ventures to form concepts, determination of the criteria that constitute a concept presupposes observation of the facts to be included under the concept. Yet observation and selection of these facts requires criteria by which to assert their relation to the concept. To determine the concept of poetry, I must derive it from the facts that make up its scope; yet to observe which works belong to poetry I must already have a criterion by which to recognize the works as poetry. This [circular] relationship is the most general characteristic of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. (GS VII, p. 186)

This ‘virtuous’ rather than ‘vicious’ aspect of circularity in the human sciences is a central part of the theme of the ‘hermeneutic circle’ in Dilthey’s thought and a well-known concern of all German hermeneutic philosophy from Schleiermacher to Heidegger (1927/1962, p. 194) and Gadamer (1960/1975, pp. 235–241).

Dilthey’s differentiation of *Verstehen* and *Erklären* ought not, then, to be seen as dualistic in any controversial sense. Although he remains predominantly a theorist of the humanities, in the sense of the study of symbolic artefacts, rather than of social behaviour more generally, and although he does not yet encounter the combination of interpretive with causal-explanatory and statistical methods that characterizes specifically social science today, Dilthey does not present his opposition in a rigidly categorical manner. He still distinguishes what he calls the generalizing ‘systematic’ human sciences of economics and linguistics from the more purely narrative-based discipline of historical research itself. And he also makes clear that the scope of the ‘cultural’ and ‘mental’ (*geistig*) should not simply

be limited to the domain of 'ideas' but should be seen as encompassing all the relevant social and physical conditions under which cultural production occurs. Ever since the *Einleitung*, he emphasized that

... the reference to 'spirit' in the term *Geisteswissenschaften* can give only an imperfect indication of the subject-matter of these sciences, for these sciences do not really separate facts of the human spirit from the psychophysical unity of human nature. ... Yet this shortcoming of the expression *Geisteswissenschaften* is shared by all the other expressions that have been used: social science [*Gesellschaftswissenschaft*], sociology [*Soziologie*], moral sciences [*Moralwissenschaften*] ... or cultural sciences [*Kulturwissenschaften*]. All of these designations suffer from the same fault of being too narrow relative to their subject-matter. ... The name chosen here has at least the advantage of appropriately characterizing the central sphere of facts in terms of which the unity of these disciplines ... [can be] perceived ... (GS I, p. 58)

With the recent resurgence of scholarship on Dilthey and 19th-century hermeneutic thought, it may be hoped that renewed attention to the historical sources of social-psychological methodology will help reorient contemporary debate about the interrelation of the sciences and remove some of the more partial claims about the nature and function of interpretation and explanation in the two major domains of human inquiry.

## Notes

1. *Ideen über eine beschreibende und zergliedernde Psychologie*, in Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften* (hereafter 'GS'), Vol. V, ed. G. Misch, Stuttgart: Teubner, 1924, pp. 139–240. An abridged translation exists by H.P. Rickman, 'Ideas about a Descriptive and Analytical Psychology', in *Dilthey: Selected Writings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976, pp. 87–110. All quotations from this essay are in my own translation. However, page numbers of passages translated by Rickman appear after the stroke (/). For GS Vol. I, I use the translation by R.A. Makkreel & F. Rodi, *Wilhelm Dilthey: Selected Works: Vol. I. Introduction to the Human Sciences*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989.
2. Windelband's text, *Geschichte und Naturwissenschaft* ('History and Natural Science') (1894/1998), has recently been translated by James T. Lamiell in *Theory & Psychology*, 8(1), 1998. Lamiell (1998) also supplies a supporting commentary which criticizes the reception of Windelband's distinction between 'nomothetic' and 'idiographic' sciences by Gordon Allport. In the same issue, Leendert P. Mos (1998) relates Windelband's thought more closely to the context of turn-of-the-century German Neo-Kantianism and briefly compares his position with that of Dilthey. This article seeks to clarify Dilthey's relation to Neo-Kantianism at more length.
3. In the 1950s, William Dray made a similar point in *Laws and Explanation in History* (Dray, 1958, p. 35). Taking the example of a law-based attempt to explain the unpopularity of Louis XIV at his death in 1715, Dray showed that a

general proposition such as 'All rulers who neglect the interests of their subjects become unpopular' tells us nothing very informative, unless we add a qualification such as, 'All rulers who repeatedly take their country to war and persecute religious minorities become unpopular', but since counter-examples could be found for this, we continue adding qualifications, until we end by specifying precisely France in precisely the 17th and 18th centuries, at which point the statement ceases to be generalizable.

4. Significantly, having read Ebbinghaus's review, Husserl at first believed Dilthey's descriptive psychology to be a false start; but after a meeting of the two thinkers in 1905, Husserl then read *Ideas* and discovered that a large part of its argument coincided with his own thinking. Later, though still not without some reservations, Husserl acknowledged Dilthey's essay as 'the first attack on naturalistic psychology' containing 'a genial preview and certain rudiments of phenomenology', and expressly drew from it the title for his own work of 1925, the *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology* (see Makkreel, 1977, pp. 274–275).
5. It may be remarked here in passing that Max Weber's portrait of Benjamin Franklin in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* involves psychological understanding in precisely this sense. Weber relates Franklin's personal maxims and attitudes to life to the historical structures of ascetic Protestantism and the ethos of 'methodical conduct of life' in the same subtle way that Dilthey relates Luther's life-history to the spirit of Reformation Germany. Many of Weber's historical studies in fact provide excellent illustrations of Dilthey's distinction between 'descriptive' and 'explanatory' psychology. Weber himself emphasized that his own interest in psychology owed no debt to the empty naturalistic psychologies of Comte and Spencer (Weber, 1904/1930, pp. 51–78; 1978, pp. 31–32).
6. This differentiation in some ways also describes the outlook of Wilhelm Wundt, who distinguished between experimental psychology, on the one hand, and interpretive *Völkerpsychologie*, on the other, and at the same time enumerated various aspects of cooperation between them. Wundt's 'other' interpretive psychology has not attracted as much attention as it deserves, and Dilthey's insights may now help reunite it with the one for which textbooks have most celebrated him. However, this comparison should not be pushed too far; for Dilthey still held certain reservations with Wundt's work. In particular, whilst acknowledging Wundt's advance beyond the crude sensationism of earlier associative psychologies and his demonstration of the synthetic, creative character of mental processes, Dilthey expressly criticized Wundt's *Völkerpsychologie* on the grounds that it still covertly preserved elements of associationist thinking. In *Ideas*, Dilthey argues that the kind of complex creative mental processes exhibited by poetic imagination cannot be explained by the chemical metaphor of discrete elements that combine through some special agency to produce a novel compound: creative imagination involves the continuous rearticulation and reconfiguration of already lived unities, not the synthetic recombination of discrete elements (GS V, pp. 160–167).
7. Hubert Dreyfus (1980) here makes a similar point when he distinguishes between 'theoretical' and 'practical' 'holism' in the philosophy of science. See also Taylor (1980), and Makkreel (1983), who compares Dreyfus's argument with Dilthey's late work on the 'Typology of World-Views' or *Weltanschauungslehre*.

8. Note that although Weber did not read Dilthey very concentratedly, and seems to have been prejudiced against him by Rickert at Heidelberg, his historical method constantly shows him to be closer to Dilthey than he acknowledges. On this, see Rossi (1994).

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