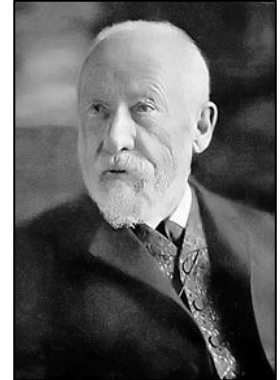




## WILHELM DILTHEY - 1833 - 1911

Wilhelm Dilthey (19 November 1833 – 1 October 1911) is often considered the forefather of phenomenology.

Wilhelm Dilthey succeeded G.W.F. Hegel as the Chair of Philosophy at the University of Berlin. He considered his work, as did many others in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as a contribution to and extension of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. More precisely, Dilthey's work can be considered a 'critique of historical reason'.



Dilthey sought not only to investigate, if not interrogate, the epistemological conditions of both the human and natural sciences, but proposed that the extension of the latter's methodology onto the former is, simply, a mistake. In short, natural science focuses on objects independently of human involvement while human sciences necessarily take account of such involvement. Moreover, he reasoned, they must do so.

Human sciences, which would include the humanities and social sciences, help define what Dilthey called the 'historical world'. Such sciences, in so far as they combine inner and outer experience, preserve a purer or more direct link with an original sense of life than do the more mediated natural sciences. Human sciences, as opposed to natural sciences, aim at an understanding that articulates the fundamental structures of historical life, as they are given in life experience. Dilthey suspected that lived experience was inherently meaningful and connected; hence, he opposed atomistic psychologies and proposed a descriptive psychology which is often read as an anticipation of phenomenology.

In 1883, Dilthey published the first volume of his *Introduction to the Human Sciences*. This work suffered the same unfortunate fate as many other magnum opuses, i.e., it was never completed. Moreover, the unfinished second volume was published posthumously. In *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, Dilthey lays out the history of human sciences and the rise and fall of metaphysics in relation to the grounding of both human and natural sciences. Dilthey argues that both natural science and metaphysics have projected a false model for and onto the human sciences in their construction of abstract worlds independent of lived experience. In place of such false models, Dilthey proposed the idea of a life-nexus, which is the original matrix of reality, for both natural and human science. Natural science's method of explanation, through elemental entities and universal mechanistic laws, in his view, does not possess a more ultimate or true reality than do the human sciences. The philosophies of empiricists and rationalists, most notably Thomas Hobbes, David Hume and Baruch Spinoza, blinded by the success of natural science, influenced a natural system of human sciences which, on the basis of such influence, sought to explain the facts of human nature on



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the basis of a few general psychic elements. More specifically, these psychological elements and a few non-teleological laws such as self-preservation were considered sufficient to account for the intricacies and mysteries of human behaviour, and the complexities of social interaction.

Dilthey believed that this reductivist explanation of human sciences brought on a further problem; namely, the division between natural and human sciences relegated the latter, and practical philosophy in general, to a secondary level and concern. In opposition to such an abstract method wherein a purely theoretical approach to the human sciences sought to explain man and men, and their values and imperatives, Dilthey proposed that self-reflection, and not a theory of knowledge, was the proper foundation for human sciences. Self-reflection, he claimed, which was ultimately based on life experience, provided the ground for both thought and action. In short, philosophical self-reflection renders practice and theory equiprimordial. In the second, uncompleted, volume of *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, Dilthey begins by examining the conditions for consciousness as it is involved in prescientific awareness of reality. This genealogy of sorts is moved by two primary principles: one, phenomenality, and two, self-reflection. Dilthey here makes a clear break with Kant, in so far as his idea of phenomenality proposes that everything real is accessible as a fact of consciousness and not as a mere representation of (as in, by) consciousness; phenomenality is not to be confused with either phenomenalism or the view that facts of consciousness are mere phenomena. At the moment that one becomes aware of something as a fact of consciousness, one possesses, what Dilthey termed, reflexive awareness. This is a pre-reflective awareness involving the feeling of a self-givenness without an explicit and independent sense of self. This reflexive awareness is not an objectified self-consciousness, in so much as it is pre-reflective and thus precedes any subject-object, act-content duality. In short, it is a sense of being already a part of the world, without, or prior to, the posited distinction between self and world. Dilthey's thoughts here are uncannily similar to those of Martin Heidegger, especially in *Being and Time*. Dilthey argued that it is precisely such pre-reflective reflexive awareness, affording a certain immediate knowledge, which is missing from natural sciences.

The second principle, self-reflection, is the agent of beginning the differentiation between immediate and scientific or conceptual knowledge. In this movement from the first to the second level, reflexive becomes reflective, in so far as awareness becomes conceptualization through the medium of explication. Self-reflection, as opposed to reflexive awareness, is capable of demarcating facts of consciousness from facts of the world. This division leads Dilthey to posit one between inner and outer perception. There is a rather atypical, for his time at least, caveat to this distinction, namely, the distinction between self and world is not posited by intellect alone. Rather, it is the result of a conceptualization of a primary and inherent resistance by outside objects to the impulses of the will. It is this tension, or resistance, which provides the ground for the conceptual distinction. This dynamic relationship, Dilthey argued, was more fundamental than a purely epistemological,



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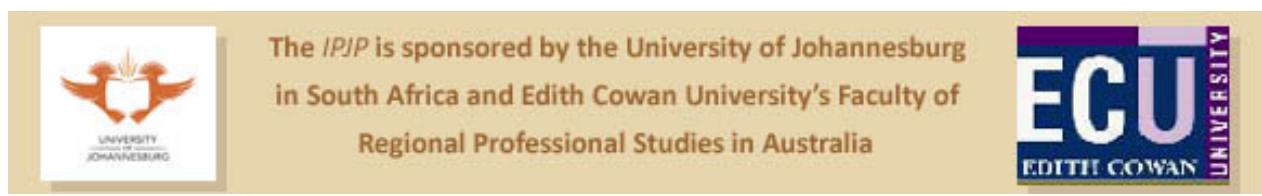
and thereby static, relation between object and its representation. In virtue of this difference, Dilthey called for a new, that is, reflective, epistemology at the foundation of human sciences.

In accord with the consequences of his primary principles, Dilthey proposes a logic where thought and perception are distinguished on the grounds of the former lacking immediate certainty, but possessing the capacity to apprehend truth. The two are distinguished, but simultaneously untied as, we can say, two stages of a single process.

For Dilthey, the task of analysis and synthesis in science is to conceptually simplify reality by organizing it on more systematic grounds. Dilthey is adamant and careful to distinguish analysis from abstraction, in so far as analysis proceeds by accounting for all facts that constitute the factors of the whole, while abstraction, he claims, singles out single particular facts, and ignores others, if not the whole itself. Dilthey concluded that only analysis, as a method, is capable of engendering understanding in the human sciences.

In *Ideas Concerning a Descriptive and Analytical Psychology* (1894), Dilthey aims to wean psychology from naturalistic models and redefine it as a human science. Psychology, Dilthey wrote, is the queen of the human sciences, in so far as she sits at the foundation with her neutral descriptions of experience. Dilthey, in this work, develops the notion of inner experience, which is not limited to mere introspection but includes our attitude and relationship towards external objects as well. Inner experience, consequently, is in some sense more encompassing than outer experience.

The concept of inner experience is intended as a substitute, and so a criticism of Kant's corresponding concept. According to Kant, experience involves the discursive faculty of understanding, which proceeds synthetically from partial representations to construct objective wholes. Kant's understanding constructs the world through fixed abstract categories; Dilthey's concept of understanding, conversely, is the complete opposite, in so much as it is both concrete and historical. Dilthey's understanding of psychic life, in so far as it is based on lived experience, can be known intuitively, and proceeds always from the whole to the part. Moreover, while Dilthey accepted Kant's limitations regarding knowledge of external objects, he rejected such a limitation on self-knowledge, that is, the understanding of ourselves and others is free of epistemic ceilings. This pure access to ourselves, a certain subjective transparency, is on account of Dilthey's claim that we make ourselves, and the creator necessarily knows his creation, inside and out. Along with psychology, social and historical reality also permit us full access, on the grounds of their involvement, if not outright responsibility. In this light, Dilthey drew another distinction between the human and natural sciences, that is, the goal of the latter is explanation, while of the former is something more, namely, understanding.





Consciousness, he believed, was not a divisible amalgamation, but a dynamic, and yet nonetheless, structural collective of cognitive, emotive and volitional aspects. Even representations are not completely alien, or alienated. For Dilthey, although feelings, dispositions, acts and the rest are not reducible to representations, there are nonetheless determining relations between them. In short, no aspect, or object, in psychic life can be understood on its own, nor function as such.

With *The Rise of Hermeneutics* (1900), Dilthey drastically changes course by claiming that much of our experience's meaning remains unconscious until it is expressed. This expression, of course, is a matter of objectification. Understanding, for Dilthey, is no longer simply a manner of describing the connectedness of the facts of consciousness, but also a clarification of these connections as meaning-relations, which cannot be interpreted by the psychic nexus, but only through a historical framework. This hermeneutical approach required Dilthey to appropriate Hegel's notion of objective spirit as the overall context of understanding. Dilthey, however, alters his predecessor's concept, in so much as he conceived objective spirit not as a socio-historical stage of the absolute spirit's self-realization, but as a moment in human activity, that is, human objectifications. Psychology, therefore, descends from the throne of the sciences, and becomes but the product of objective spirit. Moreover, subjective transparency is rejected, so much so, that hermeneutics can know the author or agent better, or more completely, than he knows himself.

Source: Adapted from <http://www.egs.edu/library/wilhelm-dilthey/biography/>



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