

Wilhelm Dilthey

1833–1911

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Despite being hailed by the famed Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset as ‘the most important thinker of the second half of the nineteenth century,’ Wilhelm Dilthey remains an obscure figure to the Anglo-American world. This while notables like **Heidegger** and **Husserl** openly recognize their debt to the breadth and depth of Dilthey’s thought.

Dilthey is best known for his defence of the distinction between the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) and the natural sciences; a distinction his positivist-minded contemporaries were intent on denying. Yet this defence is best understood as a part of his lifelong goal to provide a secure foundation for the human sciences. These include disciplines like history, psychology, economics and sociology. Dilthey asked what history and psychology and the other human sciences require in order to be done at all. That is, what is required to understand humanity? The individual human sciences are portrayed by Dilthey as interrelated and to some degree inseparable parts of a distinctive way of knowing.

Both a professional philosopher and a practising historian (he acquired some fame for his intellectual biography of Schleiermacher), Dilthey believed that historical reflection was essential to understanding humanity. He also believed that philosophy only has value when serving a practical end. Humans are constantly wrestling with pain, irrational upsets, and questions about meaning in the world. We all have what Dilthey calls a ‘metaphysical impulse’ to find a coherent picture of reality (a *Weltanschauung* or worldview) which addresses these concerns. Religion is one response to this impulse. When the response is governed by critical reflection, we call it ‘philosophy’. Philosophy thus serves an important role: to produce rules for action and empower those who use it by increasing self-awareness. Various religions and philosophies generate worldviews which seek to account for the world as we experience it.

Alas, these worldviews frequently conflict. Although Dilthey argues that widely-held views must have some element of truth, he claims that each particular view is historically determined and essentially relative. This claim, which has popularly become known as historicism, pushes Dilthey towards relativism about the nature of the world and what we

can know about it. Yet Dilthey resists complete relativism, asserting that core ways of thinking (like basic logic) are independently true regardless of historical context. This move allows us to study humanity in its temporal forms and learn from the worldviews we encounter.

What then separates the human sciences from the natural? Dilthey indicates that the human sciences share one vital feature: they are essentially about the life of the mind. This includes not only the capacity for abstract thought, but also what is produced by this activity: things like language, religion, law, even the fruits of ingenuity and technology such as tools and machines. Dilthey collectively calls these consequences the 'objective mind'.

What is unique about the life of the mind is that it essentially makes reference to purposiveness and to judgements of value in a manner that is conventional and historically conditioned.* When a natural scientist asserts a law of nature, no assumptions about context or intention are made. The claim is true or false independently of where and when it is made. But claims about humans are relative to the purposes of those involved, the interests and values of those making the claim, and the context surrounding both the subject and the object of the inquiry. As Dilthey summarizes the difference, natural science provides explanations whereas the human sciences produce understandings.

What provides the subject matter for social scientists is what Dilthey named 'life expressions'. The physical events that constitute human activity (whether the utterance of a word, a facial expression, or the act of leaving a room) carry both meaning and intention that reveal the human mind. We do not know about our humanity from mere introspection – such information is too limited to constitute science. The most revealing life expressions are the objective mind. The task of the human scientist is thus to study the consequences of the activities of the mind. By recognizing the limits imposed by historical context and interpreting them appropriately (Dilthey helped develop contemporary hermeneutics – the study of interpretation), we can hope to achieve genuine and useful knowledge about ourselves and humanity generally.

Dilthey was one of the first philosophers to argue persuasively that the methods of positivistic natural science should not be applied to the study of humankind. Instead, he sought to ground our knowledge of humanity on its own separate yet reliable foundation.

Suggested reading

Makkreel, R. and Rodi, F. 1992 (eds). *An Introduction to the Human Sciences: Selected Works of William Dilthey*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Makkreel, R. 1992. *Dilthey: Philosopher of the Human Studies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Makkreel, R. 1997 (ed.). *Wilhelm Dilthey: Selected Works: Poetry and Experience*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.