

O. F. Bollnow

Art. Dilthey, Wilhelm (Enc. Brit.)*

Wilhelm Dilthey was a German philosopher of the late 19th and early 20th century whose chief contribution to philosophy was the development of a distinct methodology for the humanities. He objected to the pervasive influence of the natural sciences and developed a philosophy of life that perceived man in his historicity; *i.e.*, in his historical contingency and changeability. Dilthey established a comprehensive treatment of history from the cultural viewpoint that has been of great consequence, particularly to the study of literature.

Dilthey was born on November 19, 1833, in Biebrich on the Rhine, the son of a Reformed Church theologian. After he finished grammar school in Wiesbaden, he began to study theology, first at Heidelberg, then at Berlin, where he soon transferred to philosophy. After completing exams in theology and philosophy, he taught for some time at secondary schools in Berlin but soon abandoned this to dedicate himself fully to scholarly endeavours.

During these years he was bursting with energy, and his investigations led him into diverse directions. In addition to extensive studies on the history of early Christianity and on the history of philosophy and literature, he had a strong interest in music, and he was eager to absorb everything that was being discovered in the unfolding empirical sciences of man: sociology and ethnology, psychology and physiology. Hundreds of reviews and essays testify to an almost inexhaustible productivity.

In 1864 he took his doctorate at Berlin and obtained the right to lecture. He was appointed to a chair at the University of Basel in 1866; appointments to Kiel, in 1868, and Breslau, in 1871, followed. In 1882 he succeeded R.H. Lotze at the University of Berlin, where he spent the remainder of his life.

During these years Dilthey led the quiet life of a scholar, devoid of great external excitement and in total dedication to his work. He searched for the philosophical foundation of what he first and rather vaguely summarized as the "sciences of man, of society, and the state," which he later called *Geisteswissenschaften* ("human sciences")—a term that eventually gained general recognition. In 1883, as a result of these studies, the first volume of his *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften* ("Introduction to Human Sciences") appeared. The second volume, on which he worked continually, never did appear. This introductory work yielded a series of important essays; one of these—his "Ideen über eine beschreibende und zergliedernde Psychologie" (1894; "Ideas Concerning a Descriptive and Analytical Psychology")—instigated the formation of a cognitive (*Verslehen*), or structural, psychology. During the last years of his life, Dilthey resumed this work on a new level in his treatise *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften* (1910; "The Structure of the Historical World in the Human Sciences"), which was also left unfinished.

Opposed to the trend in the historical sciences to approximate the methodological ideal of the natural sciences, Dilthey tried to establish the humanities as interpretative sciences in their own right. He considered as fundamental to this notion the interaction among personal experience (*Erleben*), its realization in creative expression, and the reflective understanding of this experience. He did not view the individual as isolated but always in the context of his environment. He emphasized that the essence of man cannot be grasped by introspection but only from a knowledge of all of history; this understanding, however, can never be final because history itself never is: "The prototype 'man' disintegrates during the process of history." For this reason, his philosophical works were closely connected to his historical

* Artikel „Dilthey“, in: Encyclopaedia Britannica 15 (1974), p. 804.

studies. From these works later arose the encompassing scheme of his *Studien zur Geschichte des deutschen Geistes* ("Studies Concerning the History of the German Mind"); the notes for this work make up a complete coherent manuscript, but only parts have been published.

Dilthey did not have the ability for definitive formulation; he was suspicious of rationally constructed systems and preferred to leave questions unsettled, realizing that they involved complexity. For a long time, therefore, he was regarded primarily as a sensitive cultural historian who lacked the power of systematic thought. Only posthumously, through the editorial and interpretative work of his disciples, did the significance of the methodology of his historical philosophy of life emerge. Dilthey died on October 1, 1911, in Seis on the Schlern. It is difficult to assess Dilthey the man. Even his more intimate disciples confessed to have known very little of his deeper feelings. Only the few invited to collaborate in his later years became somewhat familiar with him. They shared almost his entire day, reading to him, taking dictation, even drafting complete passages for him. They learned while being involved in various aspects of his work. And yet, each one perceived only one facet; nobody had full comprehension of the whole. Even to them, Dilthey remained the "strange mysterious old man."

BIBLIOGRAPHY. A detailed biography is lacking, although HANS-HERMANN GROOTHOFF and ULRICH HERRMANN, "Wilhelm Dilthey: Persönlichkeit und Werk," in *Die Pädagogik Wilhelm Diltheys*, pp. 334-365 (1971), is a carefully executed recent work. A complete bibliography appears in ULRICH HERRMANN, *Bibliographie Wilhelm Dilthey* (1969). Dilthey's works are collected in his *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16 vol. (1923-72), with more volumes in preparation. Works on Dilthey in English include HERBERT ARTHUR HODGES, *Wilhelm Dilthey: An Introduction* (1944, reprinted 1969), with translations of selected excerpts; and *The Philosophy of Wilhelm Dilthey* (1952); and H. PETER RICKMAN, *Meaning in History: Wilhelm Dilthey's Thoughts on History and Society* (1961), which contains a general introduction and selected writings.

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