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# An Essay on Wilhelm Dilthey and the History of Ideas

*Hiroshi Nishimura*

I shall not, in this essay, attempt to deal with Dilthey's accomplishments in the realm of pure philosophy. I shall here consider rather Dilthey's value as an historian of ideas. The unique structure of his mind, however, forbids a complete separation of his historical research from its philosophical origins.

Dilthey defined the dominating impulse of his philosophical thought as the desire to comprehend human life in its own terms. Dilthey was profoundly impressed by the problems which his age had been set in the realm of state and society, and was, therefore, appreciative of the efforts of Comte and Mill. However, he imagined that any attempt to force the vast field of the humanities into the strait-jacket of the so-called scientific method was doomed to failure. He sought a more adequate approach to the complexities of the human world, and found it in history. His philosophical efforts to find the way into the domain of reality, to lay valid foundations insuring an objective knowledge of it—this urge was but the other side of his desire to penetrate the historical world more deeply. In such a manner did Dilthey become the historian of ideas, for a man to whom history and philosophy are but two different aspects of the same central approach will of necessity present history as the history of ideas. He will see ideas at the core of world history. To understand reality through history was, therefore, Dilthey's aim.

History should be not only a revival of the past, as Ranke desired; it should be the means of understanding life. It would not be worthwhile to be an historian, if it were not also a way to understand the world. What in Kant and Herder had been the

work of two full lifetimes, what Hegel had violently forced into the units of his dialectic, Dilthey in a strictly scientific manner, attempted to amalgamate. The relativities and the universally valid must be brought into deeper connection. The sympathetic understanding of all things past must become a force to form the future. Thus Dilthey appears as both philosopher and historian, as a worker immersed in the attempt to constitute the world of the mind in its own right, and as the discoverer of a new continent on the globus intellectualis.

Dilthey does not try to explain the changes in history as a dialectic movement of concepts; he looks for deeper causes—the real evolution of man.

Dilthey was bound to the heroic age of Germany not only by love and tradition; he found that in its poetry, philosophy, history, and educational viewpoint, a new metaphysics of life itself had emerged to which he could and did adhere. Dilthey rejected the form in which Schelling, Fichte, Hegel, and Schopenhauer manifested this idea, but he affirmed its content, because it contained his own belief, that life is a central point of meditation.

Compared with Herder's or Hegel's grandiose visions or even with Rauk's story of the world, Dilthey's attempts lack unity and coherence. He had neither Herder's belief in humanity nor Hegel's faith in the progress of the consciousness of liberty, nor Comte's conviction of the triumph of science. He was a relativist. Universal history existed for him not as a problem to solve extensively, but only intensively.