

## W. Dilthey as an Expert Historian

Irina Guryeva<sup>1,a</sup>, Olga Mazayeva<sup>2</sup>, and Margarita Kruglikovai<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Tomsk Polytechnic University, 634050 Lenin Avenue, 30, Tomsk, Russia

<sup>2</sup>Tomsk State University, 634050 Lenin Avenue, 36, Tomsk, Russia

**Abstract.** The work is devoted to the analysis of W.Dilthey's (1833-1911) heritage as a practical historian. There is a need for a deeper understanding of his views on the human studies in general. The purpose of this work is the analysis of concrete historical works of Dilthey in their interrelation with his theoretical and methodological views. According to the paper purpose, the tasks of the research are: to examine the main features of Dilthey's theoretical and methodological views in their evolution; to observe the philosophical foundation of his works; to describe and to interpret the way he constructs historical reality in his works about Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment. The object of this paper is connection and interrelation of theoretical and practical works of Dilthey..

### Introduction

Wilhelm Dilthey, the outstanding German philosopher and historian (1833-1911), had a significant influence on the development of human studies in the 20th century. His impact is distributed over a wide area from the philosophy and methodology of history to special studies. It is worth mentioning Dilthey's contribution not only to philosophy but also to history, psychology, sociology, anthropology and literary criticisms.

The main feature of his approach is to ground the own nature of human studies "in the living reality". Dilthey emphasized the need to develop the methodology of the human knowledge so that its domain is not subsumed by the natural sciences and it can develop its own models of explanation. According to his opinion humanities differ from sciences in their subject and methodology, but, at the same time, they provide objective and relevant knowledge. They should have their theoretical basis and methodology. That is why the hub of his work was his philosophy of the human studies – that was his attempt to provide theoretical foundation for the methodology of the disciplines concerning human beings. Therefore, in accordance with the so-called "anthropological turn" in the second half of the 20th century, his work is directly relevant to discussions about the place, status, functions, and limits of human studies. Now the recognition of his importance is growing. The evidence of renewed interest calls for a critical assessment and provides the material for it.

However, Dilthey is known not only as a philosopher of history. All his life he worked as a practical historian of ideas, pioneering intellectual biography as his special field. He had vast experience in practical research in the

field of cultural, state, ethnical history. He is revealed as an expert historian, who created impressive performance of the largest historical epochs - the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment. Almost throughout his life he retained an interest in such work. Critics point out the richness and depth of his concrete historical works. He is characterized as a historian of great subtlety, versatility and erudition. Nevertheless, this aspect of his work is still not properly studied.

That is why the purpose of this work is the analysis of concrete historical works by Dilthey in the interrelation with his theoretical and methodological views. According to the work purpose, the tasks of the work are to analyse the main features of theoretical and methodological views of Dilthey in their evolution; to describe and to interpret the way he constructed historical reality in his works on the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment.

The object of this paper is: connection and interrelation of theoretical and practical works by Dilthey. The subject is: the characteristic features of connection and interrelation of theoretical and practical works by Dilthey.

### Methods and historiography of the problem

The methodological basis of this work is the comparative-historical method aimed at mapping of historical principles enunciated by Dilthey in his theoretical and methodological works, with his concrete historical studies. The narrative, historical-literary,

<sup>a</sup> Corresponding author: guryeva.irina@gmail.com

explanatory methods, as well as elements of hermeneutical analysis also are used.

Historiography of the problem: there is a huge number of researches devoted to Dilthey. Among the authors who had written about him there are outstanding philosophers, such as Rickert, Aron [1], Gadamer [2], historians like E. Trelch. A number of papers provide a complex analysis of his scientific work. The books by O. von Bollnow, M. Rickman and M. Ermarth are worth mentioning. [3,4,5] There are also a lot of papers devoted to particular aspects of his studies.[6] However only in a few works his historical heritage is overviewed. Usually it is done very fragmentary. Nevertheless, the study and analysis of its heritage as that of a practical historian are necessary for understanding his views on the human studies in general.

## Results and discussion

### Dilthey's conception of historical knowledge

W. Dilthey was both a philosopher and a historian. Being the philosopher, he belonged to the "Life Philosophy" direction, as like Nietzsche, Bergson and others.[7] But in opposition to anti-historicism of Nietzsche, his understanding of life is very close to history. On the one hand, he emphasized, "Life and life experience are a perennial spring of understanding of the socio-historical world" [8]. On the other hand, he claimed, "The history is the life understood from the point of view of all mankind" [9]. To understand the meaning of history in its concept, it is necessary to consider his educational background. During his formation as a scientist he was closely connected with German historical school whose views are usually described as historicism. Dilthey had attended the lectures of Leopold von Ranke whom he greatly admired. Some principles of historicism are noncontroversial till nowadays. They are for example the methods of working with different sources from state papers to letters and memoirs. The most meaningful idea of historicism is that all historical phenomena like law, religion, state, morality are subjects of historical change. As M. Rickman notes, "This, in turn, meant that it was impossible to apply external standard to history and to judge different periods in general terms. As Ranke put it, all ages are equally near to God" [4]. However, agreeing with many of the aims and methods of historicism, Dilthey thought it lacked philosophical foundations. He wrote, "However, even today the Historical School has not yet succeeded in breaking through the inner limits which have necessarily inhibited its theoretical development and its influence on life. Its study and evaluation of historical phenomena remain unconnected with the analysis of facts of consciousness; consequently, it has no grounding in the only knowledge which is ultimately secure; it has, in short, no philosophical foundation" [8]). Dilthey insisted that the foundation of human studies and the human world must be essentially different from those of nature. Therefore, the humanitarian knowledge has

also to differ from the natural science. Dilthey was convinced that the human studies could fulfill their potential only if they were placed on a secure theoretical foundation rooted in experience "avoiding both the Scylla of metaphysical speculation and the Charybdis of naturalistic positivism" as M. Ermarth mentioned [5]. So Dilthey designated his project as a "Critique of Historical Reason". In his view, only such a critical founding of the human studies could provide man with the certainty of valid knowledge and to face the unprecedented tasks of the future.

What is the basis of Dilthey's foundation of human studies? As it was said, it is life experience of people. What is the way to examine it from history? According to Dilthey, the historian directs his attention to on the thoughts, feelings and aspirations of human beings, not only to great politics and economy events. So, understanding of what goes in other people's minds becomes a central feature of humanitarian research. But how could a modern historian enter into the mind of ancient people and appreciate their outlook and motives? Possibility of understanding of other people is based on their common human nature. Dilthey emphasized specific character of humanities contained that the person acting in the history and the one studying history are identical by their nature. Therefore the object and subject of historical knowledge coincide. That is the difference between humanitarian knowledge and natural sciences. A fundamental element, based on which society and history develops, is the person - *psychophysical unity* - as Dilthey called it. As the acting and learning subject in history are identical, we can understand another person "from within." It is possible because of the community of our interests, feelings, desires, aspirations based on living experience. They take only various forms depending on historical period, but are inherently identical. That is why the most relevant method of understanding other people is *emotional experience (Erlebnis)* and *emphaty*. To deal with another person, it is also necessary to understand ourselves therefore the introspection is also used. In this case the fundamentals of humanitarian methodology at this period Dilthey considered descriptive psychology. Exactly the psychology opens internal structures of the a human being person and describes them him.

However, later this approach based on introspection and emotional experience was reconsidered. It raised doubts in the relevance and reliability. That is why Dilthey might have clarified and systematized his views on methodology of human studies. That these questions were on his mind in the last years of his life.

He envisaged the project of «a Critique of historical reason» in other way. Now it is history that becomes the basis for understanding. The concept of life is not only closed but almost identical to history. As Dilthey wrote, "Man knows himself only through history" and . "What man is history alone tells him, not introspection" [9]. In other words, human nature reveals itself through the varied manifestation of its potentialities in the passage of time. Therefore his approach to the methodology changed. The fundamental method in the humanities becomes "Understanding" (Verstehen). It is more

complicated and relevant than the emotional experience. In spite of *Erlebnis* it is not neglected, it is complicated with a new element – “Expression” (Ausdruck). Expression means the results of human activities which are objectified in an external form – as artifacts, ideas, laws, customs, traditions. So, understanding refers to one mind engaging another mind. But we understand other minds by immersing ourselves in the interpretative study of their external cultural-historical objectification, not through introspection or emotional experience only. On the contrary, it is achieved through the interpretative of the expressions of that other mind, expressions that can be found in the sociohistorical world, “the world of art, religion, law and politics, language and gesture, of the shared community of experience in its living aspects” [10]. Understanding strategy comes back to the practice of the written sources interpretation– hermeneutics. Dilthey adopts this concept from Schleiermacher’s theory of interpretation. According to Schleiermacher (1768-1834), German theologian and philologist, when we read some text we cannot understand any part of the book unless we have the general notion of what the entire book is about. Yet, the whole is a structure made of parts, each of which has its own significance, as well as its meaning in relation to other parts. The act of reading thus requires a constant movement between parts and the whole in order to arrive at an understanding of the book [11]. This dynamic correlation between a part and the whole in understanding process is called the hermeneutic circle. In the case of history it means the relationship between the human individual and her/his environment. Just as words gain their precise meaning from the context, human’s activity can be understood in the context of nation, culture etc. That is why the dynamic correlation between a part and the whole, a human individual and the environment became the preconditional part of Dilthey’s conception. In this case the category of meaning should be mentioned. As M. Rickman notes, “meaning arises from the interplay between ourselves as thinking, feeling and willing creatures and the world that impinges upon us” [4]. It is no coincidence to compare the method of understanding in the history and in a language. According to Dilthey, all the sociocultural reality consisting of objectifications can be presented as symbolic sign system. As far as it is meaningful for us, it can be interpreted and understood.

Thus, Dilthey insisted that the study of history and human world must be essentially different from that of nature. In his methodological approach ‘life’ is transformed into ‘history’ and ‘emotional experience’ into ‘understanding’. Understanding strategy is based on interpretation of written sources, when the human thoughts, ideas and activities are expressed.

### **W. Dilthey’s study of the European Culture History**

Sometimes the connection between Dilthey’s theory and practice of historical research is seen as direct and immediate. For example, one chapter from one

monograph on Dilthey is called “Understanding in practice: the life of Schleiermacher” [5]. But when Dilthey worked on the biography of Schleiermacher, he did not yet start to develop his theory. Nevertheless, in M. Ermarth’s opinion, this experience was useful and it was required to create his “understanding” of methodology. At the same time, various aspects of Dilthey’s works have a certain autonomy, due to research objectives, concept, a range of sources.

Most of Dilthey’s works are devoted to the problems of German cultural history. It can be explained by the influence of the German historical school, which is a deeply national phenomenon and is based on a strong foundation of the German cultural tradition.

However, his book “Views on the World and the study of the man from the time of the Renaissance and Reformation” is devoted to the study of cultural processes in Europe on the eve of the Modernity. It consists of seven parts. The key idea of the entire book is to reflect the process of liberation of the cultural life of Europe from the influence of medieval metaphysics. This work is closely linked with the “Introduction to the Human Studies”, because it is the unfinished part of his second volume of this book.

In the beginning Dilthey makes a very eloquent statement indicating his beliefs: “In the history everything is individual, all things are full of life - nations and peoples. In the history nothing can be inferred as an exact result of existing conditions”[12]. So here are the key concepts of his approach: life and individuality. It is reflected in the structure of the book. The author put forward a problem in general, but the development of cultural processes is described in the form of biographical essays of outstanding persons. This is a true essay in a free form rather than the biography in conventional sense. Naturally the views, ideas, beliefs of the heroes are examined, their writings are analyzed, but the most important thing for Dilthey is to highlight their perception of life. This is done on the example of Petrarch. Dilthey emphasizes that his main accomplishment was neither his Latin compositions, nor the sonnets, but a new perception of life based on growing self-confidence, self-awareness, belief in uniqueness of his own personality and dignity [12]. Thus, not only the works and ideas are examined but also the behavior, lifestyle of the person. Dilthey mostly described and interpreted his heroes than explained them. That is why for Gadamer Dilthey sometimes is more a history-teller than a philosopher. The reader, in his words, expects from the author reasoned conclusions, but Dilthey just wrote: “and then there was...”[2]. Dilthey truly described the appearance of Luther in such a way: “he came” [12].

However, it is preceded by an impressive picture of the social atmosphere of the beginning of the Reformation in Germany. Here passions, interests, religious struggle are described in the spirit of increasing crescendo, and as the final chord Luther appears.

Dilthey wrote about Luther, “This is the most active, the most powerful language writer of our people. With the unique power of the depth of experience and sincere poetry he invests his Christian experience in the

symbols” For Luther, he stressed “life is the first priority. From life, from its moral-religious experience all our knowledge about the Invisible arises” [12]. So it was Luther who managed to implement German life ideal, based on “healthy, honest, truthful, cheerful piety” in Reformation processes. It is his feeling of life that helped Luther to feel and express the aspirations of the German nation and to emancipate them from the yoke of the Roman Church.

It should be noted that Dilthey constantly appeals to the concept of life in different ways. For example we can read: ‘life ideal’, ‘life concepts’, ‘living force’, ‘ethos of life’, ‘living behavior’, ‘living desire’. Thus we can state the relationship between ideas of Life philosophy and its reflection in this work. But still the complex of cognitive means used by Dilthey is richer and more diverse. Thus he paid attention to economic, social and political factors. His reviews reflect the demand for the relationship between the realm of ideas and concrete interests and facts of society. He also used the elements of explanation: as he mentioned, not only the ideas of the Enlightenment led to the French revolution, and not Luther caused the Peasants war. The reason for this was intolerable oppression. But new ideas inspired the movement and paved the way for them [12]. And, last but not least, there is the problem of correlation between “the whole and the part”, individualization and generalization.

Now we will try to examine this problem on the example of one of his latest practical works – “Of German poetry and Music”. The most impressive pages of this book are devoted to Bach and Schiller. However, it begins with a study of the German national epic. It is preceded by a wild description of the structure of German society based on war and the rural economy. Dilthey interpreted the epic as a reflection of social dominance of the warrior community. So even literary forms and genres were related to social and economic factors.

As for Bach, for Dilthey he fully expressed the incarnation of the spirit of Protestantism in his music. The possibility of adequate and full expression is very important for Dilthey. He is thinking, “How poor would be the consciousness of religiosity in every age, if every religious person would observe, what happened to him and tried to express it in terms! No, only when this feeling finds its lyrical expression in speech or music, the age rises to the understanding of their religiosity” [13]. Thus secret and innermost feelings become clear only in the expression. Therefore, the great era of Protestantism expresses itself in homily, poetry, but most of all in music, because its poetry was clumsy and imperfect, and homily was too serious. So in this case he highlights the ability of a great man to express the spirit of the age in the unique creativity. Likewise in organic connection with his epoch Schiller stayed. Dilthey emphasizes that despite his popularity, this great German poet and playwright is poorly understood. Spectators coming to the theater did not get what they expected. The reason is that he is perceived outside the historical context, without understanding the era in which he worked - the era of "Storm and stress", and

romanticism [13]. So Dilthey carefully examines the conditions of his growing up, interests, friendship with Goethe, all the circumstances that influenced him. As a result his life ideal is presented. It should be noted that Dilthey still uses concepts like "life's ideal", but only occasionally. Instead, it is a more common concept related to spiritual (Geist) life: ‘the spirit of the age’, ‘the spirit of the era’, ‘the spiritual life’. All this is directly connected with the concept of the ‘expression’. Thus, Dilthey is committed to a dynamic correlation of a part and the whole. As R. Hansen noted, Dilthey thought that personal, biographical information is vital in understanding a great thinker. He found history fascinating, and always presented the ideas of philosophers within their historical and cultural context [11]. But neither the spirit nor the facticity assumes priority. The specific relationship between them is the true object of history.

What made the biography so important, is Dilthey’s conviction that the life of a significant thinker – or, in our case, a great poet or important political figure – powerfully reflects and, in turn, transforms the intellectual, cultural, and social forces that impinge upon him. Interacting with individuals, organizations, and institutions, he is a modal point of history. A biography must, therefore, draw extensively on the history of the factors influencing the subject of the biography, who, in turn, becomes a building block of history [4]. The latest works mostly extent the interaction of individualization and generalization. There is no abrupt conversion from earlier to latest works, but the emphasis shifted from ‘life’ to ‘history circumstances’, from ‘life experience’ - to the ‘spiritual life’. In accordance with the idea of hermeneutic circle, in order to understand the whole (culture), we need to understand the part (personality) and vice versa. The process of understanding in this case never ends, but it becomes deeper and more relevant.

## Conclusion

Currently the development of Dilthey’s ideas are mostly associated with the historical-hermeneutic tradition. Interest to such ideas made his disciples unite into something like school of “Göttingen circle”. Creative ideas of this school focused on the problem of hermeneutic logic and correlated it with the historically understood life philosophy. As for his achievements as an expert historian, according to the neat expression of R.Aron, he had more admirers than supporters. Nevertheless, “through his writings, many historians have learned are to revive the past in its entirety and to see the connection of the manifestations of the spirit” [1].

However, his ideas are reflected in many sectors of knowledge - pedagogy, psychology, history of literature. In general his impact on human studies is much greater and is not limited to the reception of individual ideas, but contributes to its self-determination and foundations of historical knowledge.

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