

Wilhelm Dilthey (1883)

Introduction to the Human Sciences

Source: Introduction to the Human Sciences, publ. Princeton University Press. From the beginning a few dozen pages.

Preface

This work, the first half of which is now being published, will combine a historical approach with a systematic one in order to attain as much certainty as possible about the philosophical foundations of the human sciences. The historical approach traces the developmental path of philosophy's previous efforts to provide such a grounding; it seeks to determine the historical setting of individual theories within this development and to assess the historically conditioned value of these theories. Indeed, by penetrating this developmental nexus, the historical approach seeks to determine the innermost impulse of contemporary science. In this way the historical account prepares the ground for the epistemological foundation, which will be the theme of the second half of this study.

Since the historical and systematic accounts are to supplement each other in this manner, the historical part will perhaps be easier to follow if I indicate in advance the fundamental systematic ideas.

The emancipation of the particular sciences began at the end of the Middle Ages. However, the sciences of society and of history retained their old subservient relation to metaphysics for a long time - well into the eighteenth century. In addition, the increasing power of the knowledge of nature subjugated them in a new manner, and no less oppressively. It was the Historical School - taking that term in its broadest sense - that first brought about the emancipation of historical consciousness and historical scholarship. The French system of social thought developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Its ideas of natural law and natural religion, and its abstract theories of the state and of political economy,

manifested their political consequences in the Revolution when the armies of that revolution occupied and destroyed the ramshackle, thousand-year-old edifice of the Holy Roman Empire. At the same time, the view developed in Germany that historical growth is the source of all spiritual facts - a view which proved the falsity of that whole French system of social thought. This insight was shared by Winckelmann and Herder, the Romantic school, Niebuhr, Jakob Grimm, Savigny, and Boeckh. It was strengthened by the reaction against the Revolution. In England, it was promoted by Burke, in France by Guizot' and de Tocqueville. In all the conflicts of European society, it challenged eighteenth-century ideas about law, government, and religion. The Historical School was characterised by a purely empirical mode of observation, sympathetic immersion in the details of the historical process, a universal approach to history aiming to determine the value of a particular state of affairs solely from the context of its development. This school considered spiritual life as historical through and through and approached social theory historically, seeking the explanations and rules of contemporary life in the study of the past. New ideas flowed from it through countless channels into all the particular disciplines.

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. Lacking a healthy relationship to epistemology and psychology, this school has not attained an explanatory method. Historical vision and comparative procedures by themselves are incapable of establishing an autonomous system of the human sciences or of exerting any influence on life. When Comte, John Stuart Mill, and Buckle made a new attempt to solve the riddle of the historical world by borrowing principles and methods from the natural sciences, the Historical School could only protest ineffectually against their impoverished, superficial, but analytically refined results by appealing to a more vital and profound intuition which, however, it was unable either to develop or to ground. The strong hatred and crude language with which Carlyle and other vigorous minds opposed exact science were symptomatic of the situation. And amidst such uncertainty about the foundations of the human sciences, some scholars retreated into mere description, some remained content with brilliant but subjective interpretation, and others returned to a metaphysics that promised, to those willing to believe, principles with the power to transform practical life.

In light of this state of the human sciences I have undertaken to provide a philosophical foundation for the principle of the Historical School and for those modes of research into society currently dominated by that school; this should settle the conflict between the Historical School and abstract theories. In my own work I was troubled by questions which face every thoughtful historian, student of law, or political theorist. Thus there arose in me both a need and a plan for the foundation of the human sciences. What is the system of principles which provides a basis for the judgments of the historian, the conclusions of the political economist, and the concepts of the jurist, and which at the same time assures their certainty? Must such a system be rooted in metaphysics? Is a system of natural law or a philosophy of history supported by metaphysical concepts possible? But if it can be shown that they are not possible, then where is the firm support for a system of principles that connects the particular sciences and provides them with certainty?

The answers given to these questions by Comte and the positivists and by J. S. Mill and the empiricists seemed to me to truncate and mutilate historical reality in order to assimilate it to the concepts and methods of the natural sciences. The reaction against their approach - an inspired example of which is Lotze's *Microcosmus*, - seemed to me to sacrifice the legitimate independence of the particular sciences, the fruitful power of their empirical methods, and the certainty of their foundation to a subjective and sentimental mood which seeks nostalgically to recall by means of science a mental satisfaction that has been lost forever. Only inner experience, in facts of consciousness, have I found a firm anchor for my thinking, and I trust that my reader will be convinced by my proof of this. All science is experiential; but all experience must be related back to and derives its validity from the conditions and context of consciousness in which it arises, i.e., the totality of our nature. We designate as "epistemological" this standpoint which consistently recognises the impossibility of going behind these conditions. To attempt this would be like seeing without eyes or directing the gaze of knowledge behind one's own eye. Modern science can acknowledge no other than this epistemological stand-point. It became further evident to me, however, that it is from just this standpoint that the independence of the human sciences, as demanded by the Historical School, can be grounded. From this standpoint our conception of the whole of nature proves to be a mere shadow cast by a hidden reality; by contrast only in the facts of consciousness given in inner experience do we possess reality as it is. The analysis of these facts is the central task of the human sciences. Thus, in accordance with the spirit of the Historical School,

knowledge of the principles of the human world falls within that world itself, and the human sciences form an independent system.

Although I found myself frequently in agreement with the epistemological school of Locke, Hume, and Kant, I nevertheless found it necessary to conceive differently the nexus of facts of consciousness which we together recognise as the basis of philosophy. Apart from a few beginnings such as those of Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt, which were not scientifically developed, previous epistemology - Kant's as well as that of the empiricists - has explained experience and cognition in terms of facts that are merely representational. No real blood flows in the veins of the knowing subject constructed by Locke, Hume, and Kant, but rather the diluted extract of reason as a mere activity of thought. A historical as well as psychological approach to whole human beings led me to explain even knowledge and its concepts (such as the external world, time, substance, and cause) in terms of the manifold powers of a being that wills, feels, and thinks; and I do this despite the fact that knowledge seems to be woven of concepts derived from the mere contents of perception, representation, and thought. Therefore, I will use the following method in this book: I will relate every component of contemporary abstract scientific thought to the whole of human nature as it is revealed in experience, in the study of language, and in the study of history, and thus seek the connection of these components. The result is that the most important components of our picture and knowledge of reality - our own personality as a life-unit, the external world, other individuals, their temporal life and their interactions - can be explained in terms of this totality of human nature. In the real life-process, willing, feeling, and thinking are only different aspects. The questions which we all must address to philosophy cannot be answered by the assumption of a rigid epistemological a priori, but rather only by a developmental history proceeding from the totality of our being.

With this the most obstinate riddle related to this foundation seems to find its resolution, namely, the question of the origin and justification of our belief in the reality of the external world. From the perspective of mere representation, the external world always remains only a phenomenon. On the other hand, for the whole human being who wills, feels, and represents, external reality is given simultaneously and with as much certitude as his own self. That which is independent of us, whatever its spatial characteristics, is thus given as part of life, not as a mere representation. We know his external

world not by virtue of an inference from effects to causes or some corresponding process. Rather, these representations of cause and effect are themselves only abstractions from our volitional life. The horizon of experience, which 'initially seemed to give information only about our own inner states, thus expands, for an external world and other life-units are given together with Our own life-unit. Yet the extent to which I can demonstrate this and succeed in establishing a secure system of knowledge about society and history on the basis of this standpoint must be left to the reader's subsequent judgment about that foundation itself.

I will go into some detail in order to connect the main ideas and principles of this epistemological foundation of the human sciences with the various directions of contemporary scientific thought, and thereby to establish those principles more than once. In Book One, I begin with a survey of the particular human sciences which provide the extensive material and the impulse for this work, and shall then argue regressively from them. In Book Two, I consider the history of philosophy insofar as it seeks a firm foundation for knowledge up to the time that the fate of metaphysical foundations was decided. I will attempt to show that the search for a universally recognised metaphysics was conditioned by a state of the sciences which we have left behind us, and consequently that any metaphysical grounding of the human sciences is a thing of the past. The second volume will begin by tracing historical developments in the age of the particular sciences and of epistemology, and it will describe and evaluate epistemological inquiry up to the present (Book Three). I will then proceed to my own epistemological foundation of the human sciences (Books Four and Five). The detailed character of the historical part of this work derives not only from the practical need for an introduction but also from my conviction about the value of historical reflection together with epistemological self-reflection. The same conviction has manifested itself for several generations in a persistent predilection for the history of philosophy, and in the efforts of Hegel, the later Schelling, and Comte to ground their systems historically. The legitimacy of this conviction will become still more clear from the perspective of developmental history, for the history of intellectual development allows us to observe in the bright light of the sun the growth of a tree whose underground roots must then be examined by epistemology.

Since my task has led me through very diverse fields of knowledge, various errors will have to be excused. I can only hope the work will, to some extent, fulfil its task of unifying the essential historical

and systematic insights which the jurist and the politician, the theologian and the historian need as a foundation for successful study in their particular disciplines.

This first volume will appear before I have discharged an old debt - that of finishing my biography of Schleiermacher. After completing preparatory studies for the second half of that work, I realised that the exposition and critique of Schleiermacher's system presupposed an investigation into the ultimate questions of philosophy. Thus the biography was set aside until the appearance of the present work, which will then spare me such an investigation there.
