

## DANCE AROUND THE ABYSS

Wilhelm Dilthey is one of the great figures of turn-of-the-century social philosophy, not only in relation to the development of German thought, but in the wider process of uncovering and making explicit the polarities of the modern mind. The thinkers of the late nineteenth century were inheritors of a dual legacy passed on to them by the writers of the two preceding generations. From the romantics they received the idealistic insight into the meaningful character of historical dynamics whereas from the positivists and the empiricists they absorbed the injunction to observe particulars carefully and to relate them to one another according to the canons of inductive method. The fundamental division between finalism and modernism was replicated across the agenda of modern thought. The romantic viewpoint tended to be holistic *and* to encourage the search for methods of sympathetic understanding which would be specific to the human studies. In contrast, the positivistic standpoint gravitated towards individualism and the project of fashioning the human studies in accord with the methods of the natural sciences. Just as Kant's antinomies had generated efforts at synthesis at the beginning of the nineteenth century, at the end of *that* century the gap between competing syntheses prompted new attempts at unification. The movement back to Kant signalled the severity of the crisis, but it was the vitalistic tendency that made the most original contribution to the project of reconciliation. Dilthey was a key figure in life-philosophy, which, as Bergson insisted, was an effort on the theoretical plane to mediate between modernism and finalism. Dilthey's major importance for contemporary reflection was his application of the vitalist paradigm to the problems of the nature of historicity, the proper study of historical objects, and the foundations of liberal politics.

Kornberg demonstrates ably and precisely that the labels "historicism" and "relativism" fail to characterize adequately the complexity and import of Dilthey's thought. Dilthey's struggle was to reconcile on the plane of historical science the positivistic and ideological patterns of explanations, and on the plane of politics the tension between individual freedom and group purpose. Dilthey strove to avoid staring too long into Nietzsche's abyss, drawing the conclusions of a thorough going positivism that destroyed traditional intellectual and practical unities. But in his dance around the edge of the void he took most of the positions that still characterize debate in the human studies today. The failure of his politics and, by implication, of his theory should cause some thought about the limitations of contemporary discourse, but they should not obscure the magnificence of a restless mind searching for a formula adequate to unite a divided world. Dilthey ultimately failed to unify the divisions of Western culture because his master principle that life is the matrix in which reason appears and, so, can never be exhausted by reason, leads to the explosion of diversity and not to harmonious order. Today we inherit Dilthey's legacy and live a step closer to the edge of the abyss than he did.