

HISTORICISM AND LIBERALISM: WILHELM DILTHEY'S PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

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Until recently, most interpreters argued that the key preoccupation of German Historicism was reconstructing individual epochs and national cultures. Historicism in this view, emphasized history's ideographic character, against those who would assimilate history to the practices of the natural sciences. This image covered Historicism's political stance as well, for it was considered Germany's version of the revolt against the Enlightenment. Historicists, it was said, legitimized existing historical structures, denied universally valid values, and insisted that each age be measured by its own standards. Recently this thesis has been questioned, and scholars have pointed to the Enlightenment background of Historicism.¹

Similarly, for a long time Wilhelm Dilthey was included in the Historicist school and considered an unreserved historical relativist. Recently scholars have argued that this view is untenable. Dilthey can be termed a Historicist, but only if our understanding of the school is revised. His adherence to Historicism did not exclude belief in historical progress. Though the concept of empathetic understanding (*Verstehen*) - history's tool for reconstructing the unique and particular - was key to Dilthey's thought, he did not reject universal history. Dilthey endeavoured to blend universalism with an appreciation for the unique and particular. He elaborated history's special methodology, but also claimed that history sought universal laws just as the natural sciences did.²

Dilthey's *Introduction to the Human Sciences (Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften)* began with a celebration of the achievements of the German Historical School. However, he defined the school broadly, naming as its adherents: Winckelmann, Herder, Niebuhr, Jacob-Grimm, Savigny, Bockh, Guizot and Tocqueville. Later on Ernst Troeltsch was to criticize Dilthey for imprecision; Troeltsch limited the school to those who found the key to history in the spontaneous creations of the national spirit and drew counter-revolutionary implications from this, defending prescriptive rights and organic social theories. But Dilthey was establishing another sort of pedigree, appropriating the title of the Historical School to other purposes. Herder shared in the Enlightenment's view of progress and natural rights; Tocqueville combined a deep regard both for historic continuities and for intelligent adaptation to the modern age. Dilthey's conception of the school had little to do with the "Historicism" posited by later interpreters.³

Dilthey's *Einleitung*, his answer to John Stuart Mill's logic of the Moral Sciences, was to be a synthesis of what he called the Historical School and the Abstract School of Mill, Buckle and Comte. Both were one-sided: By positing a fixed and constant model of human nature - economic man, utilitarian man,

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rational man - the Abstract School took mere abstractions for reality. These models were heuristic devices, useful in pointing to certain constants in human behaviour, but they hardly encompassed the whole of human action. Man was a historical and social being; there was an aspect of him that eluded the fixed and constant. Dilthey criticized Comte and Buckle's preoccupation with historical law, objecting to the flat and uniform utilitarian image of man advanced by positivism. In Buckle's account of Western history, the particular was wholly absorbed in the universal. Nineteenth century man inevitably peeped out either in Antique or Medieval dress, as science and skepticism battled superstition.⁴

But the Historical School was equally guilty of one-sidedness. If abstractions missed the richness and diversity of history, those steeped in the singular missed the recurrent in history. Dilthey fully appreciated the Historical School's intuitive grasp of the uniqueness of historical epochs and peoples: "...its loving absorption in the individuality of the historical process..." But the preoccupation with singularity led to a neglect of the constants in human nature. Dilthey wished to move to a position that would combine both generalizations about human nature and a grasp of the indelibly unique and singular.⁵

In his writings on *Verstehen* Dilthey made much of its subjective side. Understanding a poem entailed comprehending the total psychic *Gestalt* from which it had emerged; this involved "...inner kinship and sympathy..."⁶ Hence the culture of Antiquity could only be correctly understood by the Renaissance. *Verstehen* reached perfection when a historic personality touched others across the span of time, as with Ranke's portrait of Luther, Goethe's of Winckelmann, Thucydides' of Pericles. However, in certain realms *Verstehen* was far more universal and objective: "...concepts, judgements, larger thought structures", were among the expressions of *Leben* most easy to grasp, for they conformed to universal logic norms. In all historic periods, men could grasp them.⁷

Accordingly, while discontinuities might reign in other areas, the realm of intellect was marked by "...uninterrupted development..."⁸ The "...homogeneity of thought..." ensured continuity, a cumulative flow in the experience of the generations of men. Problems and truths could be passed on from one generation to the next. Furthermore, mankind's intellectual acquisitions steadily encompassed wider and wider circles of humanity. As a result, "...a consciousness of solidarity and of progress..." accompanied mankind's intellectual labours.⁹

In this paper I shall not try to disentangle the elements of essentialism and historicism in Dilthey's conception of human nature, but rather describe and analyse the view of progress he formulated in the second book of the *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, his historical account of the rise and fall of metaphysics.¹⁰ For him history had realized individual autonomy and freedom. However Dilthey's view of progress raises key questions about his relationship to German idealism. He rejected idealism and adopted empiricism, yet he posited no abstract individualism as did John Stuart Mill. Dilthey's key methodological unit was the social individual, bound up in teleological systems. Humans were levered into historical collectivities, transcending the individual. For Hegel, *Geist* - a metaphysical substance - stood for the unity and identity of Reason in all mankind. With *Geist* as a common substratum inhabiting all men's

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minds, the conceptual acquisitions of Western culture could be inherited, developed and passed on among various peoples. In Dilthey's empiricist theory the history of the intellect unfolded in what he called the culture systems of religion, philosophy and science. Though men shared no underlying metaphysical being they were bound together in teleological systems, coordinating their activity in the quest for universally valid knowledge.

Moreover men were linked together in *Verbande*, "will-unities" or "ethical communities", carrying ethical ideals experienced by particular wills as objective and abiding. Dilthey's philosophy of history was a powerful anti-metaphysical critique, but there and in other writings he circled back to appropriate a great deal of the heritage of idealistic metaphysics. I shall explore the reasons for this at the paper's conclusion.

II

Dilthey's philosophy of history was emancipatory, a history of *Geist* in its "...march of conquest..." through the world.¹¹ Past history - to the dawn of the modern age - belonged to humanity's childhood, a period when religious and metaphysical "fictions" hindered the realisation of individual autonomy and freedom.¹² As men sought sure foundations for thought and action, they came to realize that religious dogmas, monolithic metaphysical formulas - all enemies of individual freedom - were merely projections or exteriorizations emanating from their minds. The notion of exteriorization recalls Hegel's concept of humanity's self-alienation.

With Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, valid knowledge of external reality was grounded in a theory of cognitions. For the naive - though in its time historically progressive - 'objectivism' of Greek thought, the structure of thought coincided with the real structure of the cosmos.¹³ "Objectivism" or "dogmatism" meant that in the Greek view of knowledge, external reality was the key determinant, not the knowing subject. Insight into true Being emerged when the intellect came into contact with an independently existing reality. Men then gave themselves over to the objects of their contemplation. This view was shadowed by the primitive residues of Greek nature worship, which highlighted man's dependence upon the forces of nature. Accordingly, the Greek formula, "Like knows like" presupposed that the structure of knowledge depended upon the real structure of the cosmos. Plato's theory of Ideas reflected these mythic sensibilities. Knowledge was gained when men gave themselves over to the Ideas, realities existing independently of the mundane world. Experience stimulated memory of that other world, known before birth though forgotten at the moment of birth. Similarly Plato saw the ground of ethics in man's "...contemplation of the Idea of the Beautiful and the Good". Guided by these Ideas, men were prompted to ethical action. Ethical awareness did not emanate from man's autonomous conscience, but from contact with an ontological realm

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outside man.¹⁴

Self-awareness, in the culture of Antiquity, never attained the free and autonomous human subject. Exteriorisations, the product of men's minds, held humanity in a relationship of dependence. Only in the second phase of its development, with the rise of Christianity, did Western culture come to realise man's full powers. Dilthey read the history of Christianity from the perspective of his liberal Protestantism. He had criticised Comte and Buckle for seeing religion as merely a "...resisting medium..." to be overcome by science, for he insisted that the religious idea as it developed through time, was the dynamic element in human progress.¹⁵ Embedded in Christianity was the principle of the sovereignty of ethical will, which would, in the progress of time, come to full self-awareness. If Hegel saw history as a long travail in which reason overcomes its self-alienation, Dilthey posited a similar process, for ethical will.

The heart of Christianity was, "...the inner experience of the will's transcendence over the order of nature..." In Dilthey's phenomenological analysis of ethical life, man's experience of the imperfections of being involved an awareness of a higher ethical standard, possessing reality independent of the self. Moreover, ethical experience carried with it an awareness of its *sui generis* character. The symbolic expression of this ethical experience was the notion of a Providence directing the whole of creation to the ultimate victory of the Good. In his conception of religion Dilthey always circled back to ethics.¹⁶

Dilthey's philosophy of history can only be understood in the light of his theory of the "metaphysical consciousness," which he considered the universal basis of religious experience. Tracing the rise and decline of metaphysics to the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance and Reformation, Dilthey pointed to the underlying experiential core in metaphysics forming the substratum of mankind's ethical and religious systems. This core: "...the metaphysical...as personal experience..." reflected, "...the experience of devotion, of the free renunciation of our egoism..." as men broke through the realm of "...pleasure, impulse and gratification..." The higher religious systems were objectifications, externalizations of this immediate experience of the will transcending the natural order. The Christian notion of a personal God was a projection of this experience. Accordingly, the notion of the creation *ex nihilo* reflected the inner experience of the will's transcendence over nature, in the will's ability to sacrifice the self.¹⁷

The history of Christianity was that of its long journey to a full awareness of the "metaphysical consciousness", and, hence the sovereignty of the will. In this sense Carlo Antonio was right in insisting that, "Progress for Dilthey was an ever-increasing Christian freedom."¹⁸ But early Christianity, still enmeshed in Greek metaphysics, would continue to attribute to God what belonged to man. Just as Feuerbach did, Dilthey asserted that man had depleted himself, while projecting his own perfections onto God. The idea of God as the fount of perfections absent in man, hindered man from understanding his own potentialities.

Christianity began its work of emancipation by tapping a source of experience and knowledge alien to Antiquity. Dilthey considered St. Augustine a key figure

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in the transition to "inner experience," for his philosophic starting point was "...the religious-ethical process of belief..." and he placed the "whole man" at the centre of his analysis. From the vantage point of inner experience he analysed the will, the rhythms of spiritual life, and the experience of time. Experiences such as freedom, conscience and guilt, the felt contrast between perfection and imperfection and the transitory and the eternal, and a longing after the ultimate, could not be mastered by knowledge or referred to demonstrable objective realities.¹⁹ Christianity initiated a historic process disengaging the inner life from its dependence upon an external objective order, defined by rational metaphysics.

But early Christianity, in the grip of Greco-Roman culture, was still far from its liberating end-point. Though now oriented to inner experience, Christians still went on to exteriorize these experiences: the gripping encounter with a Divine Will standing above nature and the cosmos, became the notion of the creation *ex nihilo*; the experience of flesh and spirit in opposition, became the theory of the incarnation. Even worse, these notions took on dogmatic authority: The kingdom of God, the creation *ex nihilo*, the incarnation, all became literal truth. Competing with other creeds, wishing to recast its beliefs into certitudes, Roman Catholicism transformed inner experience into "...a conceptual order belonging to external reality..."²⁰

As a consequence, power still lay in external reality, not in man. Christians believed that the intellect acquired knowledge because men participated in the *Logos*, the Ideas emanating from the Divine. Religious experience objectified became Catholic dogma, an authoritative system flowing from God's will. The Church was God's chosen instrument of Grace, while ordination was a special grace endowing the clergy with power emanating from the Divine. Usurping the Divine charisma, the Roman Church devised "...a mechanism for ethical life, and hierarchical cant..."²¹

Enmeshed in the metaphysics of Antiquity, Christianity ascribed all efficacy to God, and withdrew it from men. Though Christianity had to acknowledge man's free will and responsibility, human freedom was subordinated to an all-powerful God, omniscient and the source of all Good. Hence, God as creative, sustaining, providential Will, directed and sustained all finite wills, providing them with efficacy, driving them to their goal. With a kind of "alchemist's art," medieval theology laboured to reconcile human and divine freedom, granting human will and efficacy a small bit of breathing space by concluding that God created and sustained human will but bestowed it with the power to move independently in the direction imposed, foreseen and willed by Him. Though Christianity had sacrificed the notion of, "...man's free will and responsibility and consequently his autonomy, to the church's tendency to see all good in mankind flowing from God through the agency of the Church..." , the consciousness of man's freedom was slowly struggling to the surface.²²

As *Geist* continued its historic "...march of conquest..." , seeking "...sure foundations for thought and action..." , it came to grasp more deeply and profoundly the meaning of human freedom, for the effort to reconcile metaphysics with the experiential truth of Christianity ended by undermining

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both metaphysics and the Church's authority. Metaphysics continually collided with the personalist and voluntarist side of Christianity, until the persistent attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable gave way to a recognition of their fundamental antagonism. The more completely Medieval thought embraced its historic task, endeavouring to synthesize rational theology with the certainties of the religious *Erlebnis*, the more sharply the antagonisms emerged: like those legendary heroes, "...the more they struggled, the more tightly they became entangled in their bonds."²³

Christian thought became ensnared in antinomies. Inner experience had proclaimed the primacy of will in God; metaphysics emphasized reason. But if the world came into being as a result of God's creative will, how could this be reconciled with reason which was eternal and unchanging? If the world was rational, then it could not be different than it was, and necessity ruled its creation; but this limited the sovereignty of the Divine will. Moreover, if will ruled the acts of the Divine, this implied that God could change, suffer, lack for something, and this contradicted His perfection. Antinomies abounded: If the Divine Reason was eternal, unchanging, why did God intervene in history, confronting man in finite time? Scholasticism tried to reconcile the irreconcilable by carving out a realm where faith alone applied, or by challenging the generally accepted conclusions of reason. Aquinas placed the creation *ex nihilo* in the realm of faith. Albertus Magnus argued on rational grounds, that the eternity of the world was inconceivable. But these expedients did not calm uneasy spirits.²⁴

Medieval metaphysics came to fruition with the Franciscans Duns Scotus and William of Occam, both of whom shattered the fragile synthesis of the scholastics. Both were uncompromising, driving ideas to their ultimate consequences, boldly plumbing the sources of antinomies, unafraid of shaking the foundations of Medieval theology. Disengaging will and reason instead of trying to reconcile them, Duns Scotus set the stage for the first solid analysis of the will's freedom in the history of the West. Bifurcating will and reason unreservedly, he was able to do justice to the will. The will was not pulled along conceptual paths determined by thought, it was *sui genesis* - it had its own nature, its end lay in itself. When Scotus insisted that ethical law was founded in God's fiat rather than in His reason, he was not regressing to an anti-intellectual fideism. By stressing the living deed and person of God, he was furthering the urge toward freedom, germinating in Christianity.²⁵

The urge toward freedom was more fully realized in William of Occam, whom Dilthey considered the "...most powerful philosophic personality..." since Augustine. Occam went to the heart of the difference between will and reason as opposed modes of knowledge, and anchored the self-knowledge of the will in immediate experience. As Dilthey believed, immediate experience involved a subjective awareness by those enduring guilt, overcoming impulse and need, of the power of their ethical will. As such, this awareness came only to those who actually made freedom a reality in their lives. Occam heralded the modern principle of "independence of will" and demonstrated it in his own life struggles.²⁶

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The principle of the will's sovereignty, embedded in Christianity, had momentous political consequences. Recognition of the will's freedom meant acknowledging that man, as an ethical agent, was "...an end in himself of boundless value..." and that the end and aim of the ethical process lay in man, not in ethical, political or religious communities transcendent to him.²⁷ In Dilthey's formula: "The self-sufficient basis and sole aim of the ethical process rests in the person."²⁸ Rational metaphysics, on the other hand, the heir of Greek 'objectivism', absorbed human will into its conceptual structures, making it part of a larger whole. Metaphysics set the fulcrum of the ethical process in universal entities that overran the single individual, in the Platonic State or later, the mystical body of the Church.

Since reason was universal, identical in all men, binding them in a common essence, embracing reason had led to asserting the reality of universals over the individual, and to insisting that the whole dignity of the individual lay in his participation in real universals. This point was reached by non-Christian philosophers, who wholly absorbed the individual in the universal. Accordingly, the twelfth century Arab Aristotelian Ibn. Roschd (Averroës) even denied personal immortality. Separate intelligences were mere emanations of God's reason, which alone possessed immortality. Averroës' theories were to find their counterpart in Hegel's "panlogism," absorbing the individual into a metaphysical unity - the Idea - realizing itself in superpersonal historic entities.²⁹

The conception of the state developed by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, had been in keeping with the monolithic spirit of metaphysics. The state was considered an ethical unity meant to realise the Idea of the Good, and the polity was to be shaped into a unified will directed to the Good. In this abstract "...metaphysical poem" the State took on the aspect of a psyche, its parts unified to serve a higher end. Plato posited three castes, each with its assigned functions, constituting a unified polity. The wise rule, the strong support them, and the masses, sunk in appetite, obey. In a state whose goal was the Good, power was to be accorded to those with wisdom and virtue. In this abstract polity, the statesman was like the Demiurge, imposing form on recalcitrant matter - the banal appetites and interests of individuals, considered by Plato a lower order of being. Dilthey judged the Platonic state an adumbration of the Hegelian bureaucratic state. In both cases individual will and interests were subordinated to a guiding Reason, represented by a ruling strata transcending these interests (in the Hegelian state, the bureaucracy) and attuned to the good of the whole.³⁰

Accordingly, Occam's position had wide-ranging political implications: "...personality endowed with ethical will and its free power now confronted all authority..." His nominalist position, that knowledge of universals would have to give way to knowledge of concrete persons, nullified the "...empty abstractions..." underlying Medieval social theory. The Medieval "...economy of salvation..." assumed that individuals were embedded in all-inclusive substantial unities. Humanity was one such substantial unity, and Adam's sin and Christ's salvation penetrated all men. Metaphysics gave philosophic content to the Pauline notion of the Holy Spirit as a sort of soul, constituting the real unity of that mystical body, the church. Later, the notion of the mystical body became

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politicized, reappearing in the conception of the state as an organism. For John of Salisbury the state was a "...*corpus morale et politicum*..." whose parts were intermeshed like the organs of a human body. By insisting that universals were mere signs, not substantial realities, Occam undercut the ontological basis of medieval social theory.³¹

Dilthey's critique, both of the Greeks and of Medieval social thought, was an extension of his war against Hegel's philosophy of history, with its metaphysical political constructs. More than that, Dilthey was arguing against all theories that made a unified ethical will the nucleus of their polity, whether Comte, the Catholic church or the Romantic theoreticians of the *Volksgeist*. "Inner experience" sanctioned the claims of freedom; "...the subjective content of the inward life..." had an autonomous character. Man did not absorb this content from society, but from a realm of inner experience independent of society.³² Dilthey drew a straight line from Occam to Luther, then to the Puritans, and to Kant and Fichte, Humboldt and Schleiermacher.³³ The conception of political freedom developed by Kant, Fichte, Humboldt and Schleiermacher grew out of the notion of "moral individualism" rooted in Christianity.

III

Appropriating the heritage of modern individualism, Dilthey then insisted that human nature was deeply embedded in society and history. In the *Ethik*, he placed the theoreticians of inner experience side by side with those who believed ethical rules originated in man's social life. In this view men were embedded in, "...*Verbände* of an ethically productive character..." hence "...inwardly shaped by a collective spirit." As a result the ethical process did not unfold in the "...isolated individual..." but through the mediation of the "...social ethical religious whole..." The great historic instances of this view were the Platonic state, the Roman republic, Augustine's City of God, the Catholic church and the Hegelian bureaucratic state. The Catholic formula could stand for them all: "*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*" - there was no salvation outside the church. Dilthey insisted both approaches were legitimate; he wished to effect a new synthesis incorporating these two perspectives.³⁴

Men fight most vociferously against those akin to them in outlook, for their similarities and differences are subtly, threateningly intermingled. If Dilthey spent much of his time disowning Hegel, he was also close to him in some ways and accepted a basic premise of Historical Idealism, that ideas were carried by the ethical collectivities engendered by history. As criticism of Hegel Dilthey had insisted: "When the solitary soul struggles with its destiny, what it endures in the depth of its conscience is for its sake alone, not for the sake of the world - process nor for any social organism."³⁵ But if Dilthey created space for the single individual in the historical process, he also left room for what he called society's external organisations. These were teleological systems, "...transcending the individual"... they too were the carriers of progress, the guarantors of historic

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continuity. Dilthey called them *Verbände* - great "will-unities" exercising power over individuals and sub-ordinating them to a common will. *Verbände* included the family, the community, church and state, corporate bodies and institutions. *Verbände* were ethical communities, with a collective will voicing ethical commands emanating from group life.³⁶

The modern secular philosophy of history, as Dilthey believed, grew out of Christianity, which had first assumed a providential scheme unfolding in history in necessary stages. The Christian view of history assumed that mankind was a metaphysical unity inheriting original sin through Adam and redeemed through participation in the mystical body of the church. The modern philosophy of history had simply substituted the Idealistic collective *Geist* for the old religious universals. Both overrode the reality and efficacy of the autonomous individual. Just as God's will, directing history, provided most of the efficacy for human will, pulling men along as it were by invisible threads, so freedom for Hegel meant being in harmony with *Geist*.³⁷

However, metaphysical universals in Christianity and Hegelian theory expressed a partial truth. Wills were bound together in *Verbände*; these incorporated universally valid aims. History was the play of these "...powerful will-unities..."; 'progress entailed the individual's "...sacrificial devotion..." to them. As Dilthey insisted: "*Verbände* link the generations in a framework that outlasts them. As a result, the growing acquisitions of humanity, laboriously accumulated in the culture systems, are gathered in stable forms, preserved, as though under a protective covering. Human association is one of the most powerful agencies of historical progress."³⁸

Verbände had a life of their own. Men go their way following petty ambition, selfish interest, filling their niche on earth, and serve in the process, these great teleological systems. In a telling image Dilthey insisted that the blind Faust in his last days, could just as well stand for the hero in history as the masterly Faust, who shaped nature and society with the "...eye and hand of a sovereign..." History used men to achieve its purposes. "Even when it comes to the deeds of its heroes, history renders them ineffectual if they are of no use to its teleological systems." Men were instruments of larger forces, operating often beyond their understanding or control. In this sense, Dilthey argued, Hegel's concept of the 'cunning of reason' was correct.³⁹

IV

Dilthey endeavoured to steer a course between individualism and a recognition of human nature's embeddedness in society and history. His synthesis was characteristic of late nineteenth century German liberalism; Emile Durkheim, in France, was engaged in a similar enterprise. Elaborating his synthesis, Dilthey sought a middle course between organic and mechanistic analogies in defining the relationship between the individual and the group. Men were conscious of themselves as a part of living wholes operative in them,

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extending to their inmost being; they were also conscious of themselves as separate personalities with intrinsic value and individual purposes. Men were not merely means to a group end, neither was the group a mere means for the individual ends of its members. Combining elements of community and individuality in varying degrees, *Verbände* provided space for some free activity and also limited this activity, at one and the same time.⁴⁰

Dilthey's position implied no uncritical or submissive attitude toward institutions, for he warned of the tendency of *Verbände* to subjugate culture to their ends. The interaction between what he called culture systems - the free creations of science, art, philosophy and religion - and *Verbände*, was a great theme of history. Creativity in the culture systems was the outcome of freely coordinated activity, while in the *Verbände* human action was regulated by the collective New ideas produced in the culture systems could later alter *Verbände*, while the latter could hold back the free unfolding of the creative spirit or grant it a wide and efficacious sphere of activity.⁴¹

Man was neither to be subordinated to superpersonal entities, nor disengaged from them. As Troeltsch was to put it later on: individuals do not make up the whole, but they identify themselves with it. Men remained normatively bound to *Verbände*. For Dilthey Christian individualism sanctioned no "...antisocial-subjectivity...". However, he was arguing that *Verbände* be characterised by freedom rather than coercion, conscientious personal judgement rather than subordination. Again, Troeltsch put this position succinctly: The German idea of freedom involved "...autonomous dutiful devotion and cooperation, along with watchfulness and responsibility...a union of initiative with devotion, pride with discipline, creative force with a sacrificial sense for the whole."⁴²

Georg Iggers has argued that by emphasizing the Christian origins of the idea of freedom, hence conceiving of it as largely spiritual and non-political, German liberals were able to harmonise the claims of freedom with those of community.⁴³ Hock's study of Gustav Droysen suggests this may have been true of some liberals, for whom freedom had emerged from the Christian tradition. For Droysen the nub of freedom lay in the "...free decision of conscience." Droysen's aim was the freely-willed union between individual personality and *Verbände*, termed by him "ethical unities" ("*sittliche Gemeinsamkeiten*"). These unities were the overriding source of ethical norms. Individual self-determination involved freely recognising the ethical power these unities exercised over personality. In Droysen's vision of freedom, the emphasis lay on the expanded sense of personal responsibility unleashed by the act of free decision. Personal responsibility was realised in free devotion to superpersonal entities.⁴⁴ For Dilthey on the other hand, both the individual and *Verbände* had equal status as carriers of ethical values and the acquisitions of culture systems. Dilthey's notion of moral autonomy implied a greater degree of separation and critical distance between individuals and *Verbände*.

With his view of *Verbände* as key units of history, Dilthey believed that German history had nurtured a special kind of state and that liberal reform was bound to this historic ethical collectivity. The revival, after 1848, of the heritage of the Prussian Reform Movement and the war of liberation, shaped Dilthey's

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lifelong political orientation. In a series of essays on the Prussian Reform Movement published in 1872, Dilthey adopted the themes of the Stein renaissance of the 1850's. He insisted that Stein had been Germany's greatest statesman, comparable, in standing, to Richelieu in France.⁴⁵ The institutions envisaged by Stein - municipal self-government, Provincial Estates and an Assembly of Imperial Estates - would initiate a creative partnership between Prussia's citizenry and the bureaucratic monarchy. Stein drew from German traditions of self-government and owed nothing to foreign models. His aim was: "The participation of the nation in the administration of public affairs." Such participation was to nurture a sharpened sense for the good of the whole. Political consciousness not channelled into, "...free discussion and participation in the state...", ended up in a sterile political negativism. Denying citizens participation in public affairs stunted the vitality of the polity's collective spirit (*Gemeingeist*) and encouraged privatism, the reign of self-interest and a negative and critical attitude to the state. Participation in public affairs fostered patriotism and public spirit, creating that "civic sense" upon which "the feeling for the state" (*Staat sinn*) rested.⁴⁶ As Dilthey had insisted in 1862, disagreeing with Fichte's conception of the state: "...in the free forms fashioned by the historical and national spirit, there lies a far more effective, power than in anything dictatorially engendered and controlled by the state."⁴⁷ In 1872, one year after the founding of the Second *Reich*, Dilthey was calling on his countrymen to renew the traditions of the German Reform Movement, reminding Germans that the work of Stein had not yet been completed.⁴⁸

Dilthey accepted the conservative institutional structure of the Second *Reich*, with its monarchical constitution, its alliance of throne and altar secured by an established church with a mixed consistorial-synodal system, its state controlled universities with appointment and promotions in the hands of state officials. More exactly, Dilthey's position was midway between the left and right wings of German liberalism. His was a statist liberalism that stressed individual autonomy, fought against narrowly utilitarian and bureaucratic ideals of education and against uncritical submission to officialdom.⁴⁹

In the German liberal tradition, the state was represented by the crown and bureaucracy whose role was to transcend particular interests. Parliament belonged to the sphere of civil society. As an entity above civil society, the monarchy was the visible embodiment of the state's ethical content. Though most liberals, including Dilthey, held this view, this shared premise could harbour significant variations. Dilthey's view was very far from Treitschke's, for whom the eighteenth century bureaucratic state was the earthly realisation of Plato's rule of the wise.⁵⁰ In a letter to Treitschke in 1870, Dilthey commented on his friend's view of the history of the Netherlands, scolding him for his adulation of the House of Orange who, according to Treitschke, had wisely marshalled society for the state's defence. Dilthey countered that unchecked preoccupation with the defence of the state threatened to make society an "armed fortress". The "...apostles of peace, trade and science..." were equally essential to the polity. At odds with Treitschke, Dilthey appealed to values threatened by an exaggerated concept of the state. It was not the House of Orange, he insisted, that had made

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the culture of the Low Countries such an important link in the chain of European history, spawning Arminianism and fostering freedom and progress.⁵¹

Dilthey's synthesis of the individual and the superpersonal was based upon his conviction that Germany could avoid the pitfalls of both atomized individualism and despotism. Yet increasingly his political position was shadowed by contradiction, disillusionment and despair. Typically, during the Second Empire, he fought against the Kaiser's attempt in 1890 to promote narrow chauvinism and anti-socialist propaganda in the curriculum of the German Humanistic gymnasium. He approved that part of the *Kulturkampf* legislation abolishing church supervision of schools and requiring of priests successful completion of state examinations, but opposed the "police excesses" that gave the state sole power to expel and appoint clerics, considering these measures violations of the church's relative autonomy. He joined in the agitation against the Zedlitz bill of 1891 that would have restored church supervision over the *Volksschule* to counter the growing strength of atheism, materialism and socialism. In the 1890's the government and conservative political circles tried by intimidation and pressure to quiet both the "red professors", proponents of a paternalist state socialism, and liberal academic critics of government policies. In response, Dilthey's essays of 1900 on Frederick's alliance with the German Enlightenment, pointedly criticised the overbearing Frederickian repression in educational and religious affairs. In that same period, Dilthey was involved in representation and petitions to the government protesting its attempt to dismiss Leo Arons, a Dozent in physics who was a member of the Social Democratic Party. Dilthey joined those who argued that membership in the SPD was not tantamount to advocating revolution. Dilthey's letters of the 1890's are full of complaints about the heavy hand of personal government seen in the Kaiser's personal intervention in cultural affairs and in theological appointments, and in disciplinary action by the High Consistory against clerics who questioned fundamentalist beliefs.⁵²

By 1880 when Bismarck broke with the National Liberals and the Empire moved to the right, Dilthey's political observations showed an increasing note of despair. He was, however, hostile to the newly-formed left of centre Liberal Union (*Liberale Vereinigung*) for their attitude of principled opposition to the government. As he believed, liberals ought to go more than half-way in their efforts to restore their alliance with the state. With the accession of William II in 1888 Dilthey was at first heartened by his liberal attitude to the workers, hoping it would end the rift between them and the state. When William abandoned these plans, and turned hostile to trade union rights, Dilthey's disappointment was intense. During the 1880's and 1890's Dilthey's letters to his friend Yorck von Wartenburg were a litany of complaints about bureaucratic repressiveness, coupled with the expressed conviction that only a progressive bureaucracy in the spirit of Stein could end the malaise in which the German polity had fallen.⁵³ With the Puttkamer purges of 1881, the Prussian bureaucracy had, however, lost its progressive elements. In Germany the project of wedding the values of individual autonomy to the historic form of the German monarchical state was defeated by history. It was a defeat that Dilthey's theoretical synthesis made him

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reluctant to face.

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Notes

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1. For an early influential statement of this view, see Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, Glencoe, Illinois, 1949, 479-80. For a contemporary version, see Georg Iggers, *The German Conception of History*, Middletown, Connecticut 1968, 3-11. The new school of social historians in Germany sees historicism as ruling class ideology. Karl-Georg Faber has discussed these views in *History and Theory* XVI (1977), 51-66. For a summary of contemporary notions about historicism and an alternative viewpoint, see: Thomas Nipperdey, "Historismus and Historismuskritik heute," Eberhard Jackel and Ernst Weymar eds., *Die Funktion der Geschichte in Unserer Zeit*, Stuttgart, 1975, 82-95. The earlier view was encouraged by Meinecke's influential study, for he judged Historicism characteristically German. Historicism rapidly found congenial disciples in other countries; Meinecke ignores this. Nipperdey 88. For Enlightenment influences on Historicism, see Helen Liebel, "The Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism in German Thought," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 4 (1971), 359-85, Georg Iggers "Comments on Helen Liebel's 'Rise of German Historicism,'" and Helen Liebel, "Reply to Georg Iggers," *Eighteenth-Century*, 5 (1972), 587-603.
2. For H. Stuart Hughes, Dilthey's belief in history's autonomy led to skepticism and relativism. H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society* New York, 1958, 192-200. For a similar view, see Karl Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, London, 1952, 107-08. For Iggers, Dilthey never succeeded in overcoming the historical relativism engendered by Historicism's individualizing approach, Iggers, 124-44. For a similar view, see Hans-Joachim Lieber, "Geschichte und Gesellschaft in Denken Dilthey's " *Kolner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozial-Psychologie* 17 (1965), 734-41. Among the more recent interpretations, Ermath concludes that, "Dilthey chose a median position between an extreme essentialism and an extreme historicism." Michael Ermath, *Wilhelm Dilthey: The Critique of Historical Reason*, Chicago, 1978, 285. For Dilthey's view of progress, see Helmut Johach, *Handelnder Mensch und Objektiver Geist* Meisenheim am Glan, 1974, 80.
3. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. I: *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, Stuttgart, 1959, xvi. Ernst Troeltsch, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. III: *Der Historismus und seine Probleme*, Tübingen, 1922, 280-82. For Dilthey's liberal historicist predecessors, see Heinrich Heffter, *Die Deutsche Selbstverwaltung in 19 Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart, 1950, 359-64.
4. *Einleitung*, 49, 91. *Gesammelte Schriften* Vol. V: *Die Geistige Welt* "Über das Studium der Geschichte der Wissenschaften vom Menschen, der Gesellschaft und den Staat," Stuttgart, 1961, 52-53.
5. *Einleitung*, xvi, 91-92.
6. *Die Geistige Welt* "Über vergleichende Psychologie," 278.
7. *Gesammelte Schriften* Vol. VII: *Der Aufbau der Geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*, Stuttgart, 1961, 205-07.
8. *Einleitung*, 128.
9. *Die Geistige Welt* "Das Wesen der Philosophie," 375-376.
10. The historical treatises of the 1890's, on the Reformation and seventeenth century rationalism, are continuations of the historical section of the *Einleitung*. See Johach, 80, 89.

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11. *Einleitung*, 249.
12. *Ibid.*, 296.
13. *Ibid.*, 177-79.
14. *Ibid.*, 189-93.
15. "Über das Studium," 52-53.
16. *Einleitung*, 309-10, 325.
17. *Ibid.*, 384-86.
18. Carlo Antoni, *From History to Sociology*, Detroit, 1959, 34.
19. *Einleitung*, 251, 260.
20. *Ibid.*, 258. For a key discussion of the interplay between religious experience and philosophic concepts, see "Das Wesen der Philosophie," 386-88.
21. *Ibid.*, 258.
22. *Ibid.*, 280, 284.
23. *Ibid.*, 249, 330.
24. *Ibid.*, 317-27.
25. *Ibid.*, 321-23.
26. *Ibid.*, 323-24.
27. *Ibid.*, 217.
28. *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. X: *System der Ethik*, Stuttgart, 1958, 21.
29. *Einleitung*, 318-20.
30. *Ibid.*, 226-227. To liberals like Dilthey, Hegel was an apologist of the policies of the 1820's, when Prussia reverted to the traditions of the *Beamtenstaat*, adopted the repressive Carlsbad decrees, and veered away from constitutionalism. For a nineteenth century liberal critique of Hegel's support of reaction, see Wolfgang Harich, *Rudolph Haym und sein Herderbuch*, Berlin, 1955, 39-40.
31. *Ibid.*, 323-24, 346.
32. *System der Ethik*, 20-21.
33. *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. XI: *Vom Aufgang des Geschichtlichen Bewusstseins*. "Friedrich Christoph Schlosser," Stuttgart, 1960, 131. Dilthey claimed Luther was directly influenced by Occam. *Einleitung*, 324. For the continuities running from Occam to Kant and Fichte, see *Einleitung*, 273.
34. *Ethik*, 24.
35. *Einleitung*, 100.
36. *Ibid.*, 53-54, 65. *Verbände* has no English equivalent. 'Association' is too loose and contractual; 'social organism' is too cohesive and monolithic. I have translated "Zweckzusammenhang" as "teleological system." By this Dilthey meant that *Verbände* were informed by ethical ideals experienced by particular wills as objective and universally valid.
37. *Ibid.*, 99-100.
38. *Ibid.*, 53, 65-66, 100.
39. *Ibid.*, 53, 127.

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40. *Ibid.*, 74. "Über das Studium," 40, 63. Makkreel has emphasized that the interplay between the individual and society was a central theme for Dilthey. Rudolf Makkreel; *Dilthey: Philosopher of the Human Sciences*, Princeton, 1975, 63. See also Ermath, 287. "History is neither the play of purely individual activity nor the work of supra-individual forces and institutions but the reciprocal relation of both."
41. In his study of eighteenth century Prussia's Civil Code, Dilthey had delineated the complex relationship between the Prussian state and the Enlightenment. The state fluctuated between its recognition of the values of liberty, toleration, reason and science and fear of the destructive consequences of "free reflexion." The newly founded Berlin Academy was allowed to publish scientific and political works, but this right was hedged in by substantial restrictions. Similarly religious heresy was not punishable as such, unless its expression was judged detrimental to the general welfare as defined by the state. Moreover the cultural narrowness bred by the absolutist state reduced Christianity to an insipid utilitarianism. Pastors exhibited a spirit of "...courtly obsequiousness..." Piety meant being a loyal subject. For this reason Dilthey endorsed the achievements of the Prussian Reform Movement. With Stein's reforms in self government and Humboldt's in education, Prussia had moved toward modern constitutionalism, wedding the free citizen to the state. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Vol. XII: *Zur Preussischen Geschichte* "Das Allgemeine Landrecht," Stuttgart, 1960, 196. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Vol. III: *Studien zur Geschichte des Deutschen Geistes* "Friedrich der Grosse und die Deutsche Aufklärung," Stuttgart, 1962, 147.
42. *Gesammelte Schriften* Vol. XIV: *Leben Schleiermachers. Zweiter Band: Schleiermachers System als Philosophie und Theologie*. Zwei Halbande, Berlin, 1967, 367. This reference is to Book I. Ernst Troeltsch, "Die Deutsche Idee von der Freiheit," *Die Neue Rundschau* I (1916), 66.
43. Georg Iggers, *The German Conception of History*, Middletown, Connecticut, 1968, 104.
44. Wolfgang Hock, *Liberales Denken im Zeitalter der Paulskirche*, Munster, 1957, 57-59.
45. *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. XVI: *Zur Geistesgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* "Deutsche Geschichte von Ludwig Haussier," Gottingen, 1972, 163. For the 1872 essays on the Prussian Reform Movement, see *Zur Preussischen Geschichte* "Die Reorganisatoren des Preussischen Staats (1807-1813)," 37-130. For the Stein renaissance, see Heffter, 360.
46. *Zur Preussischen Geschichte* "Der Freiherr vom Stein," 47-49.
47. *Zur Geistesgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* "Fichte als Ethiker und Politiker," 403.
48. "Der Freiherr vom Stein," 40.
49. Fritz Ringer has marked off this position on the German liberal spectrum, and termed it "mandarin liberalism." See *The Decline of the German Mandarins*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1960, 116 ff. 1969, 116 ff.
50. Hock, 67.
51. Clara Misch ed., *Der Junge Dilthey: Ein Lebensbild in Briefen und Tagebüchern 1852-1870*, Stuttgart, 1960, 290-91. Treitschke's "Die Republik der vereinigten Niederlande," appeared in his *Historische und Politische Aufsätze*, Leipzig, 1870, Vol. II.
52. For an excellent account of these issues, see Gordon Craig, *Germany 1866-1945*, New York, 1978, Chapt. VI, "Religion, Education and the Arts". On the *Kulturkampf*, 72-78. On purges in the bureaucracy, 159. For a magisterial study in which the notion of a supine Wilhelminian policy is corrected, see Ernst Rudolf Huber, *Deutsche Verfassungsgeschichte seit 1789*. Vol. IV: *Struktur und Krisen des Kaiserreiches*. Stuttgart, 1969, 894, 916, 952 (on Dilthey's role in the Arons affair). For Dilthey's responses, see *Briefwechsel zwischen Wilhelm Dilthey und dem Grafen Paul Yorck von Wartenburg, 1877-1897*, Halle, 1923, 16, 134-35, 142, 228-29. *Zur Preussische Geschichte* "Das Allgemeine Landrecht," 196. *Über die Möglichkeit einer Allgemeingültigen Pädagogischen Wissenschaft* "Schulreform." Weinheim, 1963, 83-86.
53. *Briefwechsel*, 4, 18, 228, 238. Zockler notes that Dilthey distanced himself from active politics from the late 1870s on. Christopher Zockler, *Dilthey und die Hermeneutik*, Stuttgart, 1975, 193.