

WILHELM DILTHEY ON THE OBJECTIVITY OF KNOWLEDGE IN HUMAN SCIENCES

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Abstract. Wilhelm Dilthey was one of the first thinkers whose philosophy centred on the reflection of the nature of human sciences. These sciences had evolved into academic disciplines already within the context of the concept of scientificity (*Wissenschaftlichkeit*) of German Idealism. They underwent a certain crisis of foundations in the nineteenth century in connection with the general rise of empiricism in the conception of science as such. Dilthey's goal was to provide these sciences with philosophical-epistemological foundation as a specific domain of empirical research sciences. One of the aspects of his philosophical analyses along these lines was the grounding of the objectivity of the research results of the given sciences. The very success of human sciences in their inherent aspiration to exert counter influence on social life depended directly, as he saw it, on attaining this particular goal. Two focuses can be distinguished in Dilthey's treatment of objectivity. On the one hand, he strives to demonstrate how justified is the pretension of the representations of human sciences to attain the genuine social-historical reality. On the other hand, he tries to prove that the particular representations of human sciences are justified in their pretensions to universal validity. Dilthey's analyses face major difficulties in the process of attaining both these goals, which forces him to modify his understanding of the role of human sciences in human life.

Keywords: Wilhelm Dilthey, human sciences, objectivity, lived experience, social life, understanding, liberty

1. Introduction

As a philosopher of science, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) focused on human sciences or *Geisteswissenschaften*, a term that had gained currency in German culture. These sciences underwent a so-called crisis of foundations (*Grundlagenkrise*) (Lessing 1984:132–136) during Dilthey's formative years in the second half of the nineteenth century. In Germany, human sciences had evolved into sciences mainly within the framework of the concept of scientificity (*Wissenschaftlich-*

keit) of German Idealism. However, during the first half of the nineteenth century the human sciences had developed into empirical research sciences, which made it impossible for them to understand their own nature by means of the concept of scientificity that had formed the basis for their development into academic disciplines (Schnädelbach 1991:108–117). On the other hand, a sound methodological research apparatus had been elaborated over the years within the various human science disciplines, to which they could resort in their ambitions to offer genuinely scientific knowledge of areas that until then had been studied basically from the metaphysical point of view of German Idealism. In these circumstances, Dilthey saw a new role for philosophy, the status of which as an academic discipline had become somewhat unstable in the post-metaphysical era. This role consisted in providing the existing research methodology of contemporary human sciences with the philosophical-epistemological foundation that it still lacked.

As a negative consequence of the above-mentioned lack, he points out the groundlessness of the validity pretensions of knowledge as the human sciences view it, which undermines their inherent aspiration to provide rules for the optimal management of social life. It is especially characteristic of Dilthey's reasoning that the solution of these two tasks coincides, as he sees it: the very substantiation of the objectivity of the research results of human sciences would guarantee the ability of these sciences to react back on life and society (Dilthey 2002:159).

Thus we could say that Dilthey's deliberations of the objectivity of scientific knowledge are motivated by two aspirations. On the one hand, to form an adequate self-understanding for the human sciences of themselves as legitimate members of the scientific community. On the other hand, to motivate the pretensions of human sciences to become the instrument of consciously shaping the social life.

In its endeavours to elaborate the epistemology of scientific knowledge, German philosophy relied on the national tradition, especially on the philosophical legacy of Immanuel Kant. "Back to Kant" became the catchword for a number of diverse philosophical quests in the second half of the nineteenth century in Germany. Dilthey, too, was influenced by this movement, as the very ambitious name that he gave to his epistemological aspirations testifies. Thus he set out to create "the critique of historical reason", i.e. to complete in the philosophy of human sciences something analogous to what he thought Kant had achieved within the framework of his critique of reason in elaborating the epistemological foundations of natural sciences.

In accordance with the general Kantian views, Dilthey proceeds in his philosophy from the analysis of consciousness, attributing a major role to the synthetic activeness of human spirit in the formation of human world view, just like Kant had done before him. Likewise, he adopts in general lines Kant's idea of the objectivity of scientific knowledge, according to which the latter consists in the strictly general and inevitable validity of knowledge about experienced reality. In Dilthey's opinion, Kant had managed to present convincingly the conditions of the possibility of the objectivity of cognition in natural sciences. At the same time he was positive that it was not possible to treat cognition in human sciences in an

adequate manner by proceeding from the conditions that Kant had delineated in the area of natural sciences. This, in its turn, induces Dilthey to modify Kant's transcendentalism on a large scale. In the course of this process, the concept of objectivity also undergoes a certain change. Kant regarded the general and inevitable relations between natural phenomena as objects of objective knowledge. From the point of view of human sciences, which emerged after Kant's days, unique phenomena, too, were considered to be legitimate objects of research. In fact, Dilthey regarded unique cultural phenomena as the most significant field of research of this branch of science. Thus we could conclude that objective knowledge in human sciences should also contain the universally valid knowledge of unique objects.

By and large, Dilthey's treatment of objectivity seems to have two focuses. In his earlier creative period, the grounding of the objectivity of human sciences consists in the demonstration of the fact that the ambition of these sciences to grasp reality is justified. In his later phase, however, he focuses on substantiating the universal validity of cognitive achievements in the domain of human sciences. I shall take a closer look at the respective approaches in the two subsequent parts of the present article.

2. Objectivity as correspondence to reality

Dilthey's epistemological analysis proceeds from one fundamental principle. He calls this the principle of phenomenality (*Satz der Phänomenalität*): "The supreme principle of philosophy is the principle of phenomenality: according to this principle everything that exists for me is subject to the condition that it is a fact of my consciousness. All outer things, too, are only given as a connection of facts or processes of the consciousness. Objects, things, only exist for, and in, consciousness" (Dilthey 1974a:90). This principle stresses the point that whenever man experiences something, on the most elementary level, it is a fact of his consciousness, although the non-philosophical mind is not aware of this. The term "facts of consciousness" emphasizes the significance of this principle in Dilthey's philosophical analysis as pointing to a special domain of facts. The science, therefore, that should deal with the given domain of facts, is philosophy as the universal empirical discipline. It does rely on a specific mode of experience, but experience nevertheless, and this should guarantee philosophy a respectable status among other empirical sciences.

According to Dilthey, the principle of phenomenality is the only reliable point of departure for philosophy primarily due to the fact that if there is reason at all to state that something exists, it is only in this way and inasmuch as it is a fact of consciousness. Dilthey understands philosophy, first and foremost, as "a guide for methodically grasping reality, the real world in pure experience, and for analyzing it within the limits prescribed by the critique of knowledge" (Dilthey 1989:173). Thus the principle of phenomenality, according to Dilthey's intention, should

serve as a point of departure for moving towards the solution of the central problem of his epistemology – to ground the pretension of scientific knowledge, especially that of the human science knowledge, to capture reality.

The concept condensed in the principle of phenomenality has also its critical side – Dilthey applies it to his critique of metaphysics. The very essence of metaphysics, he argues, lies in the attempts to find behind the facts of consciousness something that would allow one to deduce the facts of consciousness, and this way to explain them by means of purely intellectual apprehension. The principle of phenomenality, therefore, indicates the limit of reasonable cognitive pretension which, as Dilthey saw it, had been uncritically crossed by traditional metaphysics. Dilthey also views Kant's concept of *Ding an sich* as a metaphysical relic, by which the founder of transcendental philosophy betrayed his own critical method.

Dilthey calls the specific mode of experience, by which we become aware of what exists for us as a fact of consciousness, *Innewerden*, or reflexive awareness. By this term he denotes the primordial unity of consciousness. Dilthey argues that *Innewerden* as the most simple modality of consciousness precedes the division of subject and object, of form and content, and of act and content, by means of which the structure of consciousness was commonly described. This is a groundbreaking subject-object-identity. For this reason, Dilthey believes that the reflexive awareness of facts of consciousness on the given level is characterized by the highest degree of immediacy and certainty.

When viewed from the genealogical aspect, Dilthey treats *Innewerden* as “the most simple form in which psychic life can appear” (Dilthey 1989:254). The unity of consciousness that becomes aware in *Innewerden* remains in the sphere of consciousness that precedes the explicit self-consciousness. Accordingly, there is no self-consciousness as yet in *Innewerden*, it being primary in genealogical terms, that would clearly differentiate itself from the consciousness of outer reality. Nevertheless, it could still be called “pre-intentional” (Makkreel 1992), inasmuch *Innewerden* is related to the world even when the world has not been conceived as object as yet. The evolution of consciousness consists in the formation of a distinct self-consciousness, and of the consciousness of the world that is related to it.

Therefore, consciousness should be regarded as the nexus of life. The concept of “life”, central to Dilthey's theorizing, denotes the continuous self-domination, consisting of actions and reactions, between the “self” and the natural and social world, and the resultant experience. The term “lived experience” (*Erlebnis*) thus designates the particular experienced conflict between action and reaction at a given moment of time.

The lived experience is the smallest indivisible meaningful phenomenon of life. It represents an internally divided totality, the structure of which always contains the connection of cognitive, emotional and volitional processes. Dilthey's main critique of the earlier philosophy of consciousness, including that of Kant, is that it reduces the human experience exclusively to its cognitive aspect. This, he argues, does not allow us to explicate the human experience of the outer world adequately. Our selfhood is at the same time always a lived experience of the world in which

we live, so that the lived experience of the world is simultaneously the experience of our world. Yet there is still no subject-object or inner world-outer world dichotomy in this lived experience. In the light of the aforesaid, we can conclude that the term “lived experience” for Dilthey does not signify man’s inner emotional state but his openness to the reality of life and his immediate awareness of this. From the epistemological perspective, then, it is significant at this point that Dilthey considers this lived experience as immediately present and unquestionably given to man, and therefore as certain.

From this concept of presupposed certainty, Dilthey hopes to deduce the foundation for the certainty of contentions elaborated in the research works of special sciences. In this context, then, philosophy as the science of the facts of consciousness should, for this reason, become a universal science of foundation in relation to special sciences. He sees it as his primary task to analyse the relations of the facts of consciousness, and to present as integral a description of these as possible. The arguments made in various natural and human scientific disciplines should be ultimately verified by tracing them back to this connection of facts of consciousness. Johannes Römelt calls that kind of verification plan the two-layered model of knowledge. According to Dilthey, any knowledge can stem from experience only. But experience itself is divided into two layers. The fundamental layer of experience consists of facts of consciousness captured in *Innewerden* and lived experience immediately, and therefore unmistakably. The derived layer of experience is formed by the observation results of empirical special sciences, which might be erroneous and, being in principle open to correction, require verification on the fundamental level of experience (Römelt 1999:185–186).

Such substantiation of scientific knowledge faces major difficulties. The latter have been thoroughly analysed in various scholarly writings (e.g. Ineichen 1975, 1991, Römelt 1999). The scope of the present article, however, does not allow us to take a closer look at them. It should be mentioned in this connection, though, that Dilthey himself was aware of a major drawback in the treatment of the problem. Namely, he was forced to admit that the lived experience of the world that had a central role to play in his epistemology, was inevitably related to the situation and perspective of a definite person. This, however, endangers the attainment of the other aspect of objectivity – universal validity – by such strategy of substantiation.

3. Objectivity as universal validity

The topic of the universal validity of cognition in human sciences is therefore becoming ever more prominent in the late period of his work. On the one hand, he does emphasize the circumstance that objective knowledge in human sciences has a different sense than it has in natural sciences: “The objectivity of knowledge that is sought here has a different sense; the methods for approaching the ideal of objectivity of knowledge here display essential differences from those by which we approach the conceptual cognition of nature” (Dilthey 2002a:92). On the other

hand, the very ability of human sciences to exert influence on the management of social life depends, in his opinion, on the universal validity of the results of human sciences. He regards such ability as essentially characteristic of these sciences (De Mul 2004:259–260).

Under the influence of these considerations, his treatment of human sciences undergoes a certain change in the form of a shift in some significant accents in the late period of his work. Besides the concepts of life and lived experience that until then had been at the very core of his treatment, the emphasis on the role of understanding in the constitution of the cognitive relation, characteristic of human sciences, becomes more prominent. In his work that appeared in 1910, “The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences”, Dilthey characterizes these sciences as follows: “A discipline belongs to the human sciences only if its object is accessible to us through the attitude that is founded upon the nexus of life, expression, and understanding” (Dilthey 2002b:109). Dilthey formulated the definition of understanding, which proved to be groundbreaking throughout the late period of his work, in his article that was published in 1900, “The Rise of Hermeneutics”: “Thus we call understanding a process, in which we perceive this psychic course of life on the basis of the sensuously given signs that are the expression of it” (Dilthey 1974b:318). The cited definition stresses the fact that the mediation of perception by means of signs given in outer experience is essential to understanding. Alongside the term “sensuously given signs”, Dilthey uses in his later texts synonymous expressions like sensuously perceived “expressions of life” (*Lebensäußerungen*), and “expressions” (*Ausdrücke*).

He concedes in the abovementioned article that the lived experience alone as a basis of cognition is not sufficient enough to guarantee the objectivity of knowledge. Even if we assume that the lived experience renders the experience of reality that proceeds from it immediate certainty, the latter would still involve only the particular person alone. How would one advance from that kind of certainty to the universally valid cognition of experience? It is in this connection that Dilthey emphasizes the fact that objective cognition must be based on something external, continuously fixed, and thus intersubjectively accessible to examination. According to his new apprehension, this is the function of the expressions mediated by the external experience of human action. This is what cognition in human sciences is all about – the methodical-critical understanding or interpretation.

In his work mentioned above, “The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences”, Dilthey adds an important specification to his notion of understanding. Having defined understanding as a process in which we apprehend this psychic course of life on the basis of the sensuously given expressions of life, he stresses the autonomy of the domain of spiritual objects in relation to the psychic processes more explicitly than in his earlier texts: “Here it is a common error to resort to the psychic course of life – psychology – to account for our knowledge of this inner aspect.” (Dilthey 2002b:106). The understanding of that spirit is not psychological cognition. It is a regression to a spiritual formation that has its own structure and lawfulness. The object of understanding is not so much the inner

processes of the author but the nexus, which, having been created by the author, then becomes independent (Dilthey 2002b:107). He now describes the understanding of the spiritual formation in human sciences in terms of understanding the meanings of expressions of life. Although these meanings are formed through the psychic life of individuals, they are not identical to those. Whereas the psychic life of the one that creates the meanings is not (at least in its entirety) intersubjectively reproducible, and cannot therefore be the object of universally valid knowledge, in the case of meanings such cognition is possible.

Dilthey delineates the culture-creating activeness of mankind in the same work as the all-encompassing “objectification” or “objectification of life” (Dilthey 2002b: 168). By objectification he means, on the one hand, the externalization of human productivity, its becoming intersubjectively accessible, but on the other hand, its representation in the human “sphere of commonality” and “universality”. He denotes the latter by a term he has borrowed from Hegel, “objective spirit”. The common mentality of the society is expressed and accumulated in the objectifications of life. Wishing also to distance himself from Hegel as a metaphysician, Dilthey stresses the point that his concept of life is broader than his predecessor’s concept of spirit, encompassing besides the universal and the rational the singular and the irrational as well.

Life and spirit manifest themselves both in the material products of human activity and in the institutional forms of society, its culture systems and external organization. All these together form “this great outer reality of human spirit” (Dilthey 2002b:168) that surrounds us everywhere. The objectifications of life open up the access to life’s historical dimension through understanding, since the heritage of the earlier eras of human commonality is ever present in the form of objectifications. This heritage, had it remained just a phenomenon of individual spiritual life, would have been lost for the next generations. Thus the individual lives in the historically formed world and actualizes constantly the historical experience of the given human society, while partaking of the fixed spirit through the objectifications of life. Hence the historically universal spirituality, the “objective spirit”, manifests itself in the objectifications of life. This spirit, as Dilthey now emphasizes, cannot be psychologically perceived. It is by this term that he specifies further the concept of human sciences – “everything in which human spirit has objectified itself falls within the scope of the human sciences” (Dilthey 2002b:170).

Dilthey characterizes the inner structure of the objective spirit as a complex of productive nexuses (*Wirkungszusammenhänge*). The notion of productive nexuses refers to the connection of certain concepts, value assessments and aims, that serves as a basis for creating specific good. Such connections are characterized by historical development, during which process they acquire an ever more differentiated inner structure on the one hand, while on the other hand they are also subject to change, forming new values and altering, accordingly, the aims to be reached. The agents of the productive nexuses are, first and foremost, individuals, but also most diverse human associations that have been formed on the basis of common values for the purpose of creating good.

It is in the sphere of influence of the productive nexuses that the personality of man is formed. Men are, in fact, the “points of intersection” of productive nexuses (Dilthey 2002b:176). The objective spirit forms human subjectivity through them. This holds true for man as the subject of cognition as well. Following Kant’s views, Dilthey regards the basic structures of the synthesizing action of the cognizing subject as the condition of the possibility of scientific knowledge. At the same time, he rejects Kant’s theory of the timeless transcendental subject. He has replaced it with the concept of the empirical-historical subject, the basic structures of the action of which are socio-culturally moulded and subject to historical change. Dilthey calls such basic structures of the subject’s synthesizing activeness the categories of life. He points out that in contrast to Kant’s formal categories, which in Dilthey’s view are deduced from the kind of thinking that is separate from the original nexus of life, the life categories evolve along the basic lines of the human-historical-social life, and for this reason form the constituents of the apprehension process of such life. Because of the significance of these for the comprehension of life objectification in human sciences, he singles out such categories as meaning and sense, part and whole, temporality, connection, structure, value, aim, development, and also essence.

At the same time, Dilthey seems to be of the opinion that the possibility of objectivity towards which the cognition of human science strives for is, above all, associated with the qualities of the object that is being interpreted, rather than with the structure of the subject of cognition. As mentioned before, it must be continuously and accessibly fixed for the external experience, which makes it possible to subject it to long-time intersubjectively controlled examination. The various ways of fixation, however, are not equal in this function for Dilthey. In a posthumously published manuscript he divides the various expressions of life into three groups: (1) concepts, judgements and larger thought formations; (2) actions, and (3) expressions of lived experience (Dilthey 2002c:226–227). In the analysis that follows, he regards these expressions of life as important for human sciences on the basis of the extent to which they open up the integral life nexus that is ultimately the foundation of them all. Since the most complete access to the latter can be obtained through the understanding of the expressions of lived experience, Dilthey centres his analysis on the understanding that corresponds to this particular type of expressions. He attaches next to no importance to the type of understanding that corresponds to the first group of expressions, for this kind of expressions “have been detached from the lived experience in which they arose” (Dilthey 2002c:225). He pays more attention to the type of understanding that corresponds to the second group of expressions, since in these the inner essence of selfhood is at least partly expressed. However, as mentioned before, he singles out the expressions of lived experience as the most multifarious manifestation of the nexus of life. Yet even these, he argues, can be unreliable as sources of objective understanding, for such expressions could also be feigned, and therefore misleading. A possibility like that is in Dilthey’s opinion excluded, though, in the case of one category of expressions of lived experience – namely, that of artistic,

religious or philosophical creativity. Among these, he in particular stresses the role of written expressions of lived experience as the basis of objective knowledge: “Since it is only in language that the life of mind and spirit finds its complete and exhaustive expression – one that makes objective comprehension possible – exegesis culminates in the interpretation of the written records of human existence. This art is the basis of philology. The science of this art is hermeneutics” (Dilthey 2002c:237–238).

Since Dilthey attributes to language the privileged status of understanding life expression, in his view, then, the comprehension of language is the “archetypal” form of any understanding. He specifies the process of comprehending a linguistic expression as “determining the indeterminate”. Single isolated words have several “determinate-indeterminate” meanings (*Bedeutungen*) (Dilthey 2002c:241). They acquire a definite meaning only in the relations within the sentence. The combination of single word meanings in a definite sentence yields the sense of the latter. Thus the understanding of a language is primarily the comprehension of meanings and sense. Meaning and sense are the fundamental categories of Dilthey’s conception of understanding and interpretation.

Since word meanings relate to the sense of the sentence as parts to the whole, the understanding is characterized from the beginning as the connection of two basic operations: the whole should be understood through its component parts and the component parts through the whole. Such circular relation occurs in the very understanding of the sentence, but it becomes even more prominent in the interpretation of integral written texts. What we have here is the circular interdependence, repeatedly described in the history of hermeneutics, which is characteristic of understanding the text. Part and whole form the other groundbreaking pair of categories in Dilthey’s hermeneutical philosophy.

Next Dilthey proceeds from the prerequisite that the categories mentioned in connection with understanding language are applicable to the interpretation of life objectification in general. “Just as words have a meaning by which they designate something, and sentences have a sense that we construe, so we can construe the connectedness of life from the determinate-indeterminate meaning of its parts. Meaning is the special relation that parts have to the whole within life. We recognize this meaning, as we do that of the words in a sentence, by virtue of memories and future possibilities. The essence of meaning relations lies in the shaping of a life-course over time on the basis of life-structure as conditioned by a milieu” (Dilthey 2002c:253–254). A single expression of life has meaning when it stands as a sign in the referential relation to something that differs from it. This is why we cannot, within the framework of the given system of concepts, speak about the meaning of life in general – in Dilthey’s philosophy, life is the final irreducible reality that cannot, for this reason, refer to anything different from itself. The apprehension of life as a whole lies in understanding its sense, which is formed of the encompassing relationship of its meaningful component parts. Since life, according to Dilthey, is given to man in his lived experiences, the structural connection of lived experiences is constituted by sense. Thus, meaning is the

fundamental category of understanding lived experience. Lived experience attains unity by its meaning.

Human sciences, as Dilthey sees it, should on the one hand aspire towards the analysis of the structures of meaning of the “objective spirit” entailed in the social-historical world. On the other hand, though, they should aim at connecting the single expressions of lived experiences to particular larger structures of meanings. Thus the process of understanding in human sciences is characterized by two-way movement: it tries to integrate the meaningful separate aspects into the unity of sense and, at the same time, to reconstruct the unity of sense by taking into account the meanings of its constituent parts. In order to attain the general validity of understanding, both these directions of apprehension function in the reciprocally complementary and corrective manner. The cognition of social-historical individualities lies, on the one hand, in the treatment of the latter as products of structures of meanings and of productive nexuses, and, on the other hand, as the agents of further development of these productive nexuses themselves.

The total nexus of all these meaningful constituent areas is the nexus of life, which is accessible through the understanding of single expressions of lived experience. Life in its course is in Dilthey’s view a succession of lived experiences, the meanings of which are subject to change until the end of life. But in contrast to individual lives lived in the past, the historical life has never ended, and for this reason one can assume that the expressions of lived experience fixed in objectification will keep joining to ever new wholes as totalities of sense and constellations of meaning. This circumstance, however, questions the very aspiration of human sciences to attain the universal validity of the knowledge of the meanings and sense of life objectification.

Dilthey seems to have found a solution to this problem in the treatment of larger productive nexuses centred in themselves as wholes. He considers nations and historical periods as examples of such productive nexuses. In Dilthey’s view, the latter are characterized by a more intense inner intercourse in comparison with other productive nexuses, and also by a stronger reluctance towards any possible influences from the outside. If they do receive influences from the outside world, these will be assimilated into the structures of meaning of the era or nation itself. At the centre of such structure, Dilthey argues, is the nexus of the dominant world view, value assessments and set goals. In relation to this nexus as the whole, all other life objectifications within the horizon of the given productive nexus acquire significance as parts of this whole. The research of human sciences must place itself into this kind of wholes and describe them immanently. The completeness and self-centeredness of such wholes, the connections between the involved productive nexuses and the shared mentality should, according to Dilthey’s expectations, enable the methodically-critically founded descriptions to attain universal validity (Dilthey 2002b:159–160, 175–187).

4. Objectivity and the social-practical role of human sciences

It is easy to notice the weak points of such substantiation of objectivity. The limited scope of the present article does not allow us to present a more detailed analysis of these at this point. I would, instead, concentrate on the issue of why the founding of the objectivity of cognition in human sciences as the attainability of the universal validity of knowledge was important for Dilthey, to begin with. As he saw it, the ability of the given type of knowledge to exert optimizing counter influence on social life depended on the objectivity of this knowledge. This very ability to exert such influence, however, was in Dilthey's view essential to human sciences as the forms of the theoretical and practical self-reflection of society. However, it now appears that the attainability of the objectivity of knowledge depends on whether the phenomenon under inspection is separated from the life situation of the investigator in terms of a sufficient historical and cultural distance. Purportedly, objectivity can be achieved primarily by adapting oneself to such productive nexuses, but it is fairly problematic in relation to the perception of the productive nexus in which one lives.

Thus it appears that Dilthey's theorizing on the objectivity of human sciences does not yield the desired results. The human-scientific grounding of objectivity in the sense of the justification of the perception of reality, towards which these sciences aspire, questioned the very objectivity of these in the sense of the universal validity of knowledge. The reasoning that was to justify the aspirations of human sciences towards universally valid knowledge undermined the very ability of these sciences to affect contemporary society.

This might well be the reason why Dilthey has changed his views on the social-practical role of human sciences in his later works, although he has not said so in plain words. He now talks about the historical consciousness created by these as the liberation of man. "The historical consciousness of the finitude of every historical phenomenon and of every human or social state, and of the relativity of every kind of faith, is the final step toward the liberation of human beings" (Dilthey 2002c:310). But the kind of liberty he speaks about is no longer associated with social change but with the widening of the scope of man's horizon of lived experience through the interpretation of historical and artistic objectifications. By means of such cognition in human sciences, "human beings who are determined from within can experience many other kinds of existence through the imagination. Confined by circumstances, they can nevertheless glimpse exotic beauties of the world and regions of life beyond their reach. Put generally: Human beings bound and limited by the reality of life are liberated not only by art – as has often been claimed – but also by the understanding of the historical" (Dilthey 2002c:237).

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