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# Dilthey, Ebbinghaus, Windelband and the Decline of Descriptive Psychology Around 1895

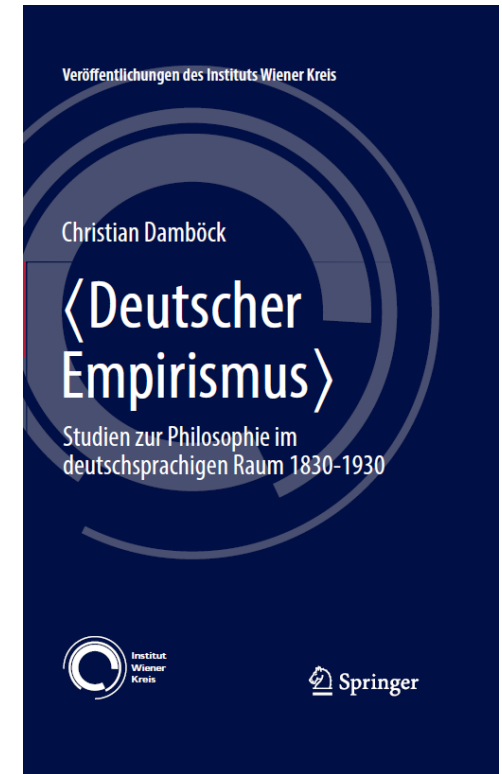
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- Starting point: my habilitation thesis (**appears recently**: request an electronic copy via email to [christian.damboeck@univie.ac.at](mailto:christian.damboeck@univie.ac.at))
- A defense of a certain variety of late 19th century German philosophy („German empiricism“)
- In this talk, I will focus on an aspect of my book that I plan to extend in the future
- Possibly another book. Working title:



**Descriptive Psychology. Steinthal, Dilthey, and the Project of a Psychological Foundation of Philosophy and the Human Sciences**



Wilhelm Dilthey  
(1833-1911)



Hermann Ebbinghaus  
(1850-1909)



Wilhelm Windelband  
(1848-1915)

1. The 1894 criticisms of Ebbinghaus and Windelband
2. Dilthey on descriptive psychology in 1894
3. Dilthey on the relationship between the natural and the human sciences: general vs. singular events
4. Dilthey on descriptive psychology in 1894/95 and 1886/87
5. Ebbinghaus and Windelband, again
6. Caught in the middle: the decline of descriptive psychology

1.

# The 1894 criticisms of Ebbinghaus and Windelband

## SITZUNGSBERICHTE

DER

KÖNIGLICH PREUSSISCHEN

AKADEMIE DER WISSENSCHAFTEN

ZU BERLIN.

JAHRGANG 1894.

ZWEITER HALBBAND. JUNI BIS DECEMBER.

STÜCK XXVII—LIII MIT FÜNF TAFELN, DEM VERZEICHNISS DER EINGEGANGENEN DRUCK-  
SCHRIFTEN, NAMEN- UND SACHREGISTER.

BERLIN, 1894.

VERLAG DER KÖNIGLICHEN AKADEMIE DER WISSENSCHAFTEN.

IN COMMISSION BEI GEORG REIMER.

Ideen über eine beschreibende und zergliedernde  
Psychologie.

Von W. DILTHEY.

(Vorgetragen am 22. Februar und am 7. Juni [s. oben S. 211. 495].)

## Erstes Capitel.

Die Aufgabe einer psychologischen Grundlegung der  
Geisteswissenschaften.

Die erklärende Psychologie, welche gegenwärtig ein so grosses Maass von Arbeit und Interesse in Anspruch nimmt, stellt einen Causalzusammenhang auf, welcher alle Erscheinungen des Seelenlebens begreiflich zu machen beansprucht. Sie will die Constitution der seelischen Welt nach ihren Bestandtheilen, Kräften und Gesetzen genau so erklären, wie die Physik und Chemie die der Körperwelt erklärt. Besonders klare Repraesentanten dieser erklärenden Psychologie sind die Associationspsychologen, HERBART, SPENCER, TAINÉ, die verschiedenen Formen von Materialismus. Der Unterschied zwischen erklärenden und beschreibenden Wissenschaften, den wir hier zu Grunde legen, entspricht dem Sprachgebrauch. Unter einer erklärenden Wissenschaft ist jede Unterordnung eines Erscheinungsgebietes unter einen Causalzusammenhang vermittelt einer begränzten Zahl von eindeutig bestimmten Elementen (d. h. Bestandtheilen des Zusammenhangs) zu verstehen. Dieser Begriff bezeichnet das Ideal einer solchen Wissenschaft, wie es insbesondere durch die Entwicklung der atomistischen Physik sich gebildet hat. Die erklärende Psychologie will also die Erscheinungen des Seelenlebens einem Causalzusammenhang vermittelt einer begränzten Zahl von eindeutig bestimmten Elementen unterordnen. Ein Gedanke von ausserordentlicher Kühnheit, welcher in sich die Möglichkeit einer unermesslichen Entwicklung der Geisteswissenschaften zu einem den Naturwissenschaften entsprechenden strengen System der Causalkenntniss tragen würde. Wenn jede Seelenlehre ursächliche Verhältnisse im Seelenleben zum Bewusstsein bringen will, so ist das unterscheidende Merkmal der erklärenden Psychologie darin

## Über erklärende und beschreibende Psychologie.

Von

HERM. EBBINGHAUS.

Unter dem Titel „*Ideen über eine beschreibende und zergliedernde Psychologie*“<sup>1</sup> hat W. DILTHEY kürzlich einige prinzipielle Fragen dieser Wissenschaft aufgeführt. Der Umfang seiner Abhandlung ist nicht gering und ihre Lektüre nicht leicht; da sie zudem an einer Stelle erschienen ist, wo man nach einem hübschen Wort „lediglich die Sternenschrift der zu entdeckenden Geheimnisse“ entziffert zu finden erwartet, so scheint es mir angemessen, ihr mit einiger Aufmerksamkeit entgegenzukommen. Ich versuche daher im folgenden die DILTHEYschen Gedanken in etwas kompakterer Form darzustellen, namentlich aber ihre etwaige Tragweite etwas näher zu beleuchten.

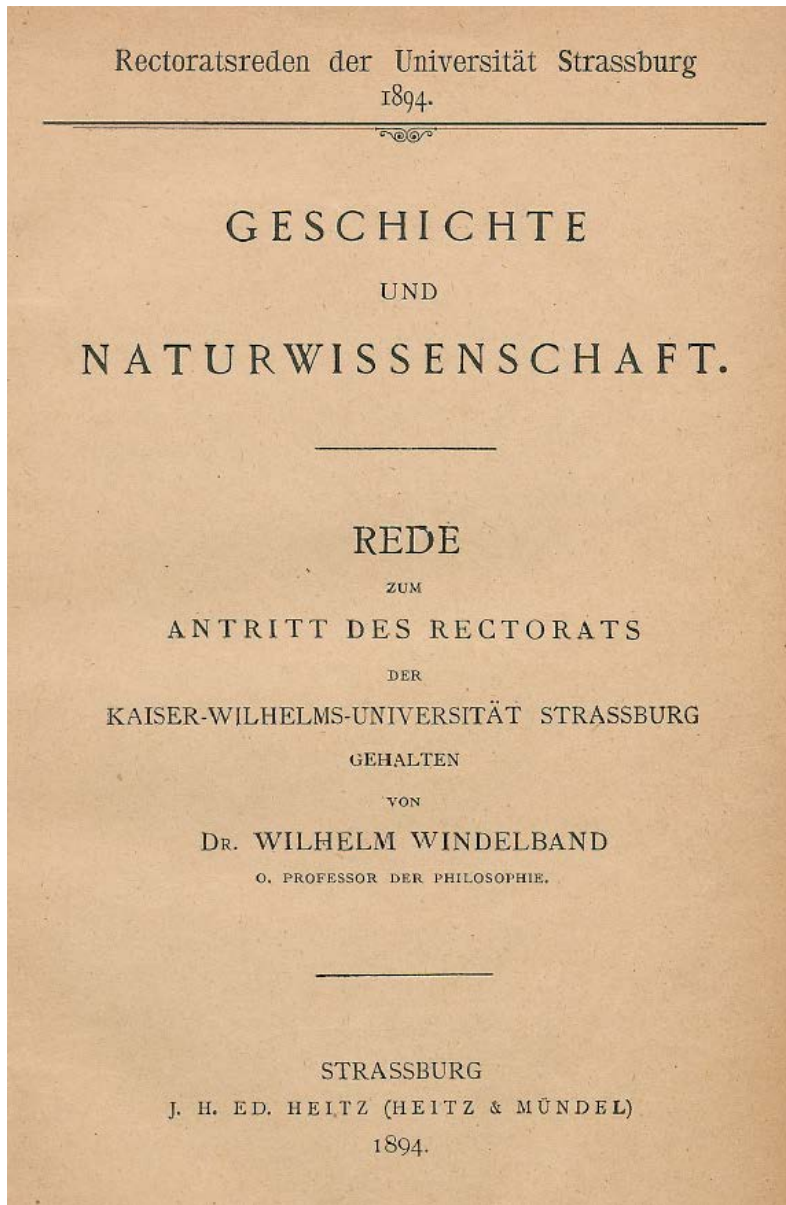
### I.

Die herrschende Psychologie folgt nach der Meinung DILTHEYS einem falschen Ideal. Sie will eine erklärende Wissenschaft sein, nach dem Vorbild etwa der Physik und Chemie, d. h. sie will die Erscheinungen ihres Gebietes „vermittelt einer begrenzten Zahl von eindeutig bestimmten Elementen“ einem großen allumfassenden Kausalzusammenhang unterordnen.

Dieses Zwiefache, eine geringe Zahl eindeutig bestimmter Elemente und die Tendenz der Ableitung, der Konstruktion aller übrigen auffindbaren seelischen Thatsachen, sind nach DILTHEY ihre charakteristischen Züge. Die Elemente, die dabei

<sup>1</sup> *Sitzgs.-Ber. d. Berl. Akad. d. Wiss. vom 20. Dezbr. 1894.* Ausgegeben am 31. Jan. 1895. 99 S. (Ich zitiere nach den Seitenzahlen des Sonderdruckes. Diejenigen der Sitzungsberichte ergeben sich durch Addition von 1308.)

- In 1896, Hermann Ebbinghaus published an extensive review of Dilthey's 1894 paper
- The review was almost half as long as Dilthey's original work
- The aim was to criticize Dilthey's conception from the standpoint of the natural sciences



- But already in 1894 (actually, before the publication of Dilthey's essay) another criticism of Dilthey's conception appeared
- Windelband entirely rejected the idea of descriptive psychology
- He criticized Dilthey from the standpoint of the human sciences („Kulturwissenschaften“)

# Ebbinghaus's criticism: major points

1. Dilthey entirely rejects explanative psychology and recommends to replace it with descriptive psychology
  - EP „follows a wrong ideal“ (p. 161)
  - „transfer of natural scientific methods to psychology is mistaken“ (p. 162)
  - In psychology „hypotheses cannot have the same importance as they have in the natural sciences“ (p. 164)
  - „Recently, these insights – according to Dilthey – led to an entire bankruptcy and to a fundamental disintegration of explanative psychology“ (p. 166)
  - „The context of psychic life and even the context of causation reveals itself [in DP] in the immediate inner experience; trying to construct it firstly via hypothetical constructions is unnecessary and impossible.“ (p. 171)



2. Dilthey's definition of EP as being based on „a limited number of univocally determined elements“ is obscure, if not absurd.
3. Dilthey thinks that causality is a matter of inner experience  
„In thinking, reasoning and other inner experiences unity and causality, connectedness and causation become immediately captured and experienced (erlebt)“ (p. 163)
4. The systematic part of Dilthey's essay is much too brief and sketchy  
„Thus, we obtain very much framework but, unfortunately, little filling“ (p. 173)
5. Dilthey identifies EP with an outdated variety, namely, associative psychology and therefore he criticizes a variety of EP that EP itself no longer defends but rather overcame (in exactly the same direction Dilthey is up to)  
„From that work that psychology does for a very long time now, *exactly in the direction Dilthey is up to*, he does not take notice.“ (p. [175-]178)

6. Dilthey's accusations to EP basically only hold for another outdated historical appearance of psychology, namely, Herbart (p. 179-186)
7. E's **main systematic point (p. 186-196)**: Dilthey's conception is based on analogical conclusions and indirect extrapolations of structural nexuses. Therefore, there is no real difference between EP and DP
  - „in what sense does this method principally diverge from explanative psychology, or at least [...] from the method of associative psychology?“ (p. 190)
  - „Concerning the principles of the method“ there is no real difference between EP and DP (p. 196)
8. The structural nexus is not a matter of lived experience
  - „The transitions from one mental state to another and all possible singular experiences might fall into inner experience; the structural nexus itself is *not* available in lived experience [...] it becomes guessed, deduced backwards, supplementary construed, or how one might call it.“ (p. 192-3)
9. „In its outlines, the method of psychology is in best order. The Diltheyian attack, therefore, runs as a shot into the air; a chain of crooked characterizations, obscurities, unfairnesses he delivers, rather than new and fruitful results.“ (p. 202-3)

# Windelband's proposal

At present, a certain classification of the disciplines which attempt to establish knowledge of reality is regularly employed. They are distinguished into natural sciences<sup>2</sup> and sciences of the mind<sup>3</sup>. Stated in this particular form, I regard the dichotomy as unfortunate. p. 9-10

. In turn, recent epistemological critique has shaken this conception in an unprecedented fashion. At the very least, it has provided strong grounds for doubting the justifiability of accepting a form of “inner perception” as a special, autonomous mode of knowledge.

The incongruity between the substantive principle and the formal principle of classification, however, is most clearly exhibited by the following consideration: an empirical discipline as important as psychology cannot be classified unambiguously either as a natural science or as a science of the mind. From the perspective of its subject matter, psychology can only be a science of the mind. In a certain sense, it may be described as the foundation of all the other sciences of the mind. From the perspective of psychology as an investigation, however, its entire methodological procedure is exclusively the method of the natural sciences.

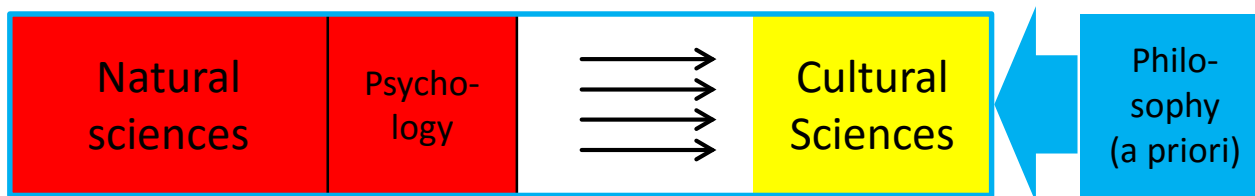
# Science, cut into pieces

In view of the foregoing considerations, we are justified in drawing the following conclusion. In their quest for knowledge of reality, the empirical sciences either seek the general in the form of the law of nature or the particular in the form of the historically defined structure. On the one hand, they are concerned with the form which invariably remains constant. On the other hand, they are concerned with the unique, immanently defined content of the real event. The former disciplines are nomological sciences. The latter disciplines are sciences of process or sciences of the event. The nomological sciences are concerned with what is invariably the case. The sciences of process are concerned with what was once the case. If I may be permitted to introduce some new technical terms, scientific thought is *nomothetic* in the former case and *idiographic* in the latter case. Should we retain the customary expressions, then it can be said that the dichotomy at stake here concerns the distinction between the natural and the historical disciplines. However we must bear in mind that, in the methodological sense of this dichotomy, psychology falls unambiguously within the domain of the natural sciences.

p. 12

# Aprioricism reconsidered

- Psychology, in its entirety belongs to the natural sciences
- The cultural sciences, on the other hand, are entirely non-psychological
- The natural sciences support the cultural sciences only insofar as they allow us to carry out singular facts (e.g., determination of the age of a mummy)
- Foundation, however, of both the natural and the cultural sciences has to be done at a strictly aprioristic level, i.e., is the task of philosophy (understood as a science a priori)



# My strategy for the following sections

- Dilthey's 1894 paper is full of misleading diagnoses and polemics that tempt us to attribute theses to Dilthey which he actually never defended
- Thus, we first have to get clear about what Dilthey actually wanted to say in his essay
- For this purpose we will have to examine also a couple of further writings of Dilthey, from the time period between 1862 and 1895
- It will turn out that
  - a. Ebbinhaus widely misunderstood and misinterpreted Dilthey whereas
  - b. Windelband's program is simply an alternative conception of philosophy being correctly described (by both W. and D.) as incompatible with Dilthey's approach

2.

# Dilthey on descriptive psychology in 1894

# Motto

Feest 2006, p. 59:

despite its title, Dilthey's paper 'concerning a descriptive and analytical psychology' is not adequately understood if we read it as a paper *merely about psychology*. Instead, it has to be read as a paper about the epistemology and foundations of the human sciences.



# The Problem of a Psychological Foundation for the Human Sciences

- Explanative psychology (EP) = psychology as a natural science
- Descriptive psychology (DP) = psychology as *the* method of the human sciences
- Dilthey's tasks are
  1. To reject EP as being not suited as a method for the human sciences
  2. To point out that the development of DP is necessary, in order to obtain a suitable method for the human sciences

## CHAPTER ONE

### *The Problem of a Psychological Foundation for the Human Sciences*

Explanative psychology, which currently attracts so much research and interest, has erected a causal system claiming to make all mental phenomena intelligible. It seeks to explain the constitution of psychic life by means of its constituent parts, forces, and laws in the same manner that physics and chemistry explain those of the corporeal world. p. 139

Now, however, the question arises whether it is legitimate for explanative psychology to transfer the way the natural sciences form hypotheses to the domain of psychic life and supplement what is given with a causal nexus. p. 142

If we do attempt to establish a comprehensive causal account, we find ourselves condemned to a haze of hypotheses in which the possibility of testing them against the facts of consciousness is nowhere in sight. The predominant tendencies in psychology demonstrate this clearly. A hypothesis of this kind is the theory of the parallelism of neural and psychic processes according to which even the most powerful psychic facts are only epiphenomena of our corporeal life. The derivation of all psychic phenomena from the lawful interaction of atomic elements is another such hypothesis. A third is the theory that claims to provide a causal explanation by constructing all psychic phenomena from sensations and feelings, thereby reducing the will that manifests itself so strongly in our consciousness and conduct of life to a derivative appearance. Mere hypotheses are used to derive self-consciousness from psychic elements and their connective processes. We have only hypotheses about the causal processes whereby the acquired psychic nexus exerts a constant influence that is both powerful and enigmatic on our conscious acts of inferring and willing. Hypotheses, everywhere only hypotheses!

# What's wrong with hypotheses??

# A limited number of elements

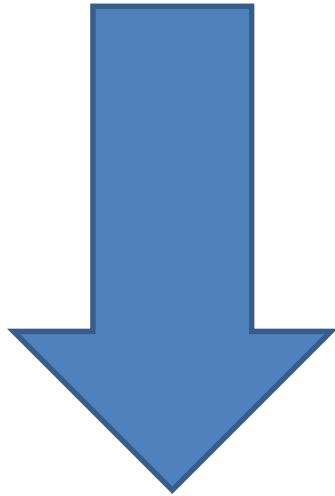
Whereas every psychological theory seeks to explicate the causal relationships of psychic life, the distinguishing characteristic of explanative psychology lies in the conviction that it can derive a comprehensive and transparent cognition of psychic phenomena from a limited number of univocally determined elements. It would thus be more to the point to call this a “constructive psychology,” p. 139-40

- But what does this mean?
- Both Dilthey's notion of „a limited number of elements“ and of EP are **ambiguous**
- The meaning of „EP“ depends on the respective notion Dilthey has in mind

# Three different meanings of „EP“

- There are three different branches of psychology which Dilthey addresses with his label EP
  - Rational psychology (Wolf):  
EP in the traditional metaphysical sense (EPM) p. 154
  - Associative psychology (Hume, Mills):  
EP in the narrower sense (EPN) p. 160-61
  - Modern scientific psychology (Spencer, Taine, Herbart, Fechner, Helmholtz, etc.):  
EP in the broader sense (EPB) p. 161-66
- Consequently, there are three different reasons for Dilthey's criticism of hypotheses:

Stream of  
consciousness



Empirical psychology  
empirically  
reconstructs the  
empirical phenomena  
of the soul

basis



foundation



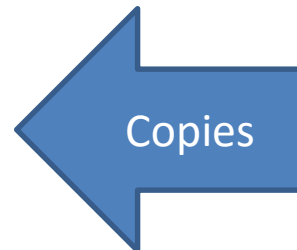
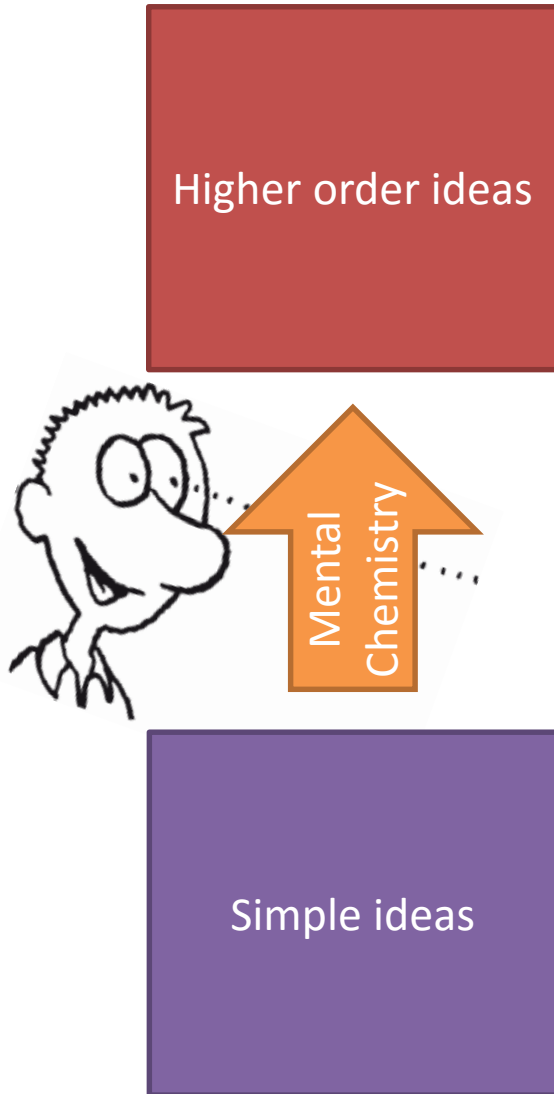
Against EPM:  
aprioricism  
(cf. p. 154)

A **limited number**  
of aprioristically  
obtained axioms

Rational psychology  
provides an aprioristic  
construction of the  
empirical phenomena  
of the soul

# Against EPN: ideas, eternally fixed (cf. p. 160)

A **limited number of**  
ideas, being based  
on spatio-temporal  
objects





# EPB: no „limited number“, but: human sciences are **mainly** descriptive

- On pp. 161-66 Dilthey discusses a number of modern representations of EP (Spencer, Taine, Herbart, Fechner, Helmholtz) and he concludes:

If we survey what results from the elaborate methodology of explanative psychology, we can establish that it concerns itself only with possibilities and aims only at a kind of probability. p. 166

Not only is it the case that hypotheses have a decisive significance at certain stages in the origin of scientific theories, but it also remains unclear how even the utmost increase in the probability of a scientific theory could ever totally eliminate its hypothetical character. p. 141

# What's wrong with probabilistic explanations of causal relationships?

- Nothing at all!

in the natural sciences the concept of hypothesis has attained a more determinate meaning on the basis of the conditions that exist for cognizing nature. ...

p. 140

It is the strength of the natural sciences that mathematics and experimentation provide them the tools for testing hypotheses with the highest degree of exactness and certainty.

- **The natural sciences** explain causal relationships (in a probabilistic way)
- But **the human sciences** serve a different purpose

# Explaining vs. understanding

The exponents of explanative psychology tend to invoke the authority of the natural sciences in order to legitimate such a comprehensive use of hypotheses. But here at the outset of our investigation we declare that the human sciences have the right to determine their methods independently in accordance with their subject-matter. p. 143-4

there exists a system of nature for the physical and natural sciences only through inferential conclusions that supplement the data of experience by means of a combination of hypotheses. In the human sciences, by contrast, the continuum or nexus of psychic life is an original or basic given. Nature we explain, but psychic life we understand.

3.

Dilthey on the relationship between  
the natural and the human sciences:  
general vs. singular events

# Against Windelband's nomothetical-idiographical-dichotomy

To a great extent, however, the human sciences do encompass natural facts and are based on knowledge of nature.

Dilthey  
1883, p. 14

Surely, what is most characteristic of the systematic human sciences is *the connection of the general and the individual*. They search for the causal relations that condition this individuation, the gradations, affinities, and types of human-historical life. These causal relations that underlie the varieties of the moral ideal or of the poetic technique must be related to the general truths as they can be established for ethical life and for poetry. When you tear apart this coherence, you cut through the core of the cognitive system of each branch of the human sciences, be it that of ethical life, of poetry, or any other.

Dilthey  
1895/96,  
p. 258

# Dilthey on Buckle in 1862 (!)

In 1862 Dilthey wrote (and anonymously published) a review of Henry Thomas Buckle's *History of Civilization in England* (1857/1861, German translation 1860/61):

[Buckle] wants to transform history into an exact science, like natural history; he wants to demonstrate the lawfulness of historical events and therefore become able to predict them. [...] [Our judgment on this work is, briefly], that though we take this basic idea, in abstracto, to be correct we still think that because of the peculiarity of the topic of historiography this basic idea can become fruitful here only to a small degree, and that Buckle, in his attempt to draw comprehensive conclusions from it, entirely went astray. (GS XVI, p. 101)

In the field of nature, like in the field of the mental, everything takes place, according to fixed laws, therefore, contingency [...] becomes precluded. [...]

Nevertheless, we are entitled to talk of contingency, in a relative way, both in the natural sciences and in history. If on a beautiful day we unexpectedly become surprised by a rain shower, we call this a bad coincidence, although we know that for a more comprehensive knowledge this rain shower stand firm since millenia. [...] The field of coincidence, in this sense, is a much greater and more important one, in the field of history than in the field of the natural sciences. In the latter we are only hampered, in the long run, to follow single incurious events [...] until their last sources; in the field of history, however, it is virtually impossible to determine the most important events on which our present state rests, because they never became repeated and [thus] we never can observe these events. Similarly, obervation cannot grasp those events that take place in the innner of the human mind, the thoughts, intentions and decisions of man who belong to the causes of those events who subsequently fall into the circle of observation as human actions .  
(p. 102)

# The overwhelming importance of contingency in the human sciences

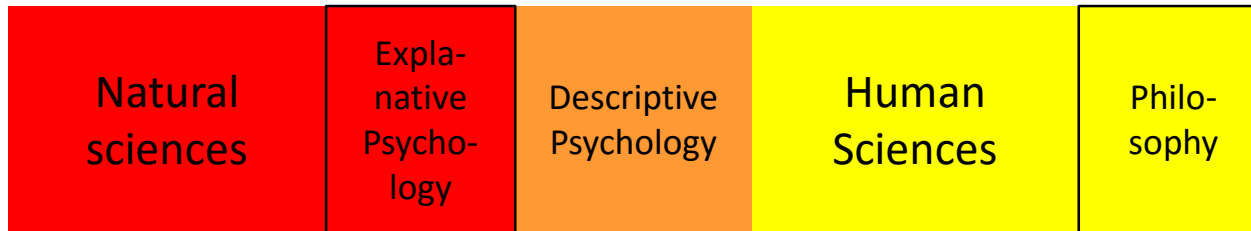
- Both those events we are concerned with in the n.s. (general events) and in the h.s. (singular events) are at heart causally explicable
- However, with respect to singular events, the development of causal explanations is much harder, because we cannot repeat them and therefore we hardly can implement experiments that allow us to justify our explanations
- Thus, in the h.s., unlike the n.s., contingency plays an overwhelming role
- H.s. are mainly descriptive, n.s. are explanative



# There are explanations of singular events, but they are hard to find

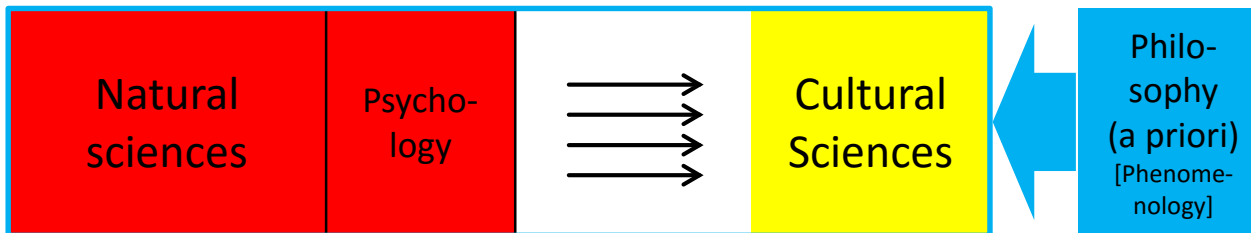
- We may search for explanations for historical (singular) facts such as
  - the assassination of John F. Kennedy
  - National Socialism
  - The 1968 students movement
- There is a limited possibility to „test“ such explanations, by means of historical parallel cases and the like
- However, the limitations of such explanations are obvious
- There are no such limitations in the natural sciences, where we only describe general facts

## German Empiricism (Dilthey, Steinthal, Cohen, Carnap)



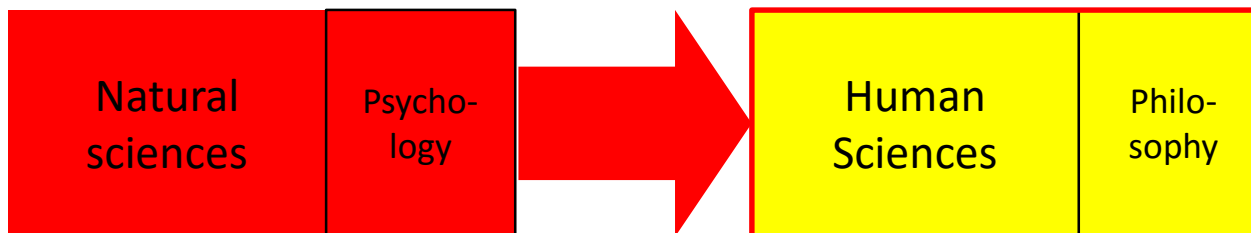
Hum. sc. mainly describe; however, they search for causal explanations for singular events and are insofar based on the nat. sc.

## Aprioricism (Windelband, Brentano, Husserl)



Nat. sc. are only relevant for the hum. sc. because they allow us to determine singular events (e.g., age determination)

## Naturalism (Buckle, Ebbinghaus, Hume)



Nat. sc. explain the whole of historical events; the hum. sc. become a branch of the nat. sc.

4.

Dilthey on descriptive psychology in  
1894/95 and 1886/87

# But still: what exactly is descriptive psychology?

- Dilthey's 1894 definition:

Let us now sum up. What one must demand of psychology and what constitutes the core of its particular method point us in the same direction. We can extricate ourselves from all the aforementioned difficulties only through the development of a psychology, which—in contrast to explanative or constructive psychology—I call descriptive and analytic. By descriptive psychology I understand a science that explicates constituents and their connections in terms of a single nexus that appears uniformly in all mature human psychic life—a nexus that is not inferred or postulated, but experienced. This psychology is thus the description and analysis of a nexus that is originally and always given as life itself.

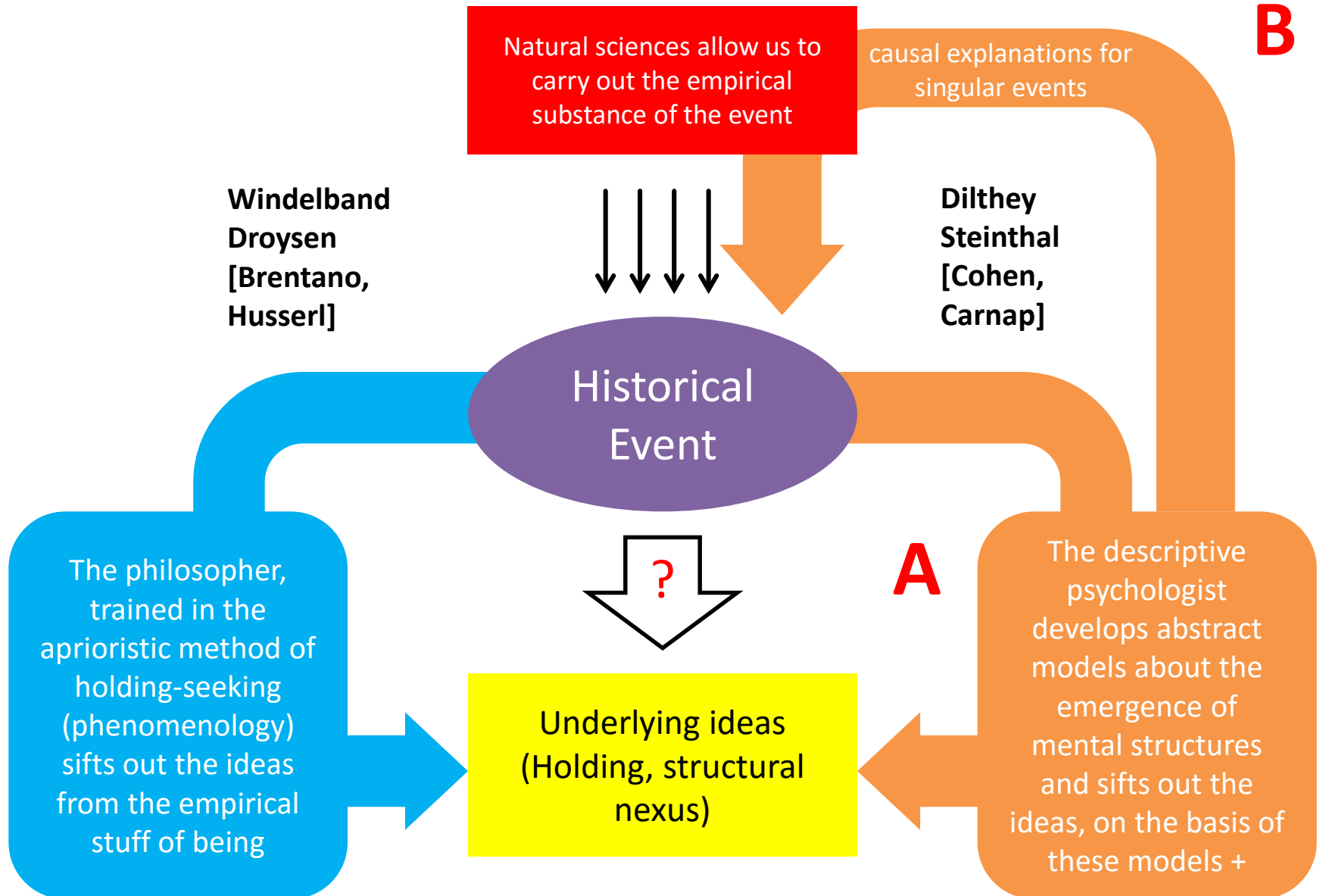
p. 152

# Windelband: history, personalized

- The aim of the historian is to sift out the ideal core of a historical event (*holding, instead of being*)
- This is not a task for descriptive psychology, however, i.e., *not an objective task*
- Rather, the historian personally understands history and, because of her individual abilities of aprioristic reasoning, manages it to sift out the ideal core of history (those things that not just *are* but *hold*)
- Thus, the whole foundationalist task for the (meta-) historian (or the philosopher of science) is a subjective task
- *The method* is something that people can adopt, on the basis of a certain training [philosophy, phenomenology, etc.]

# Dilthey: history, objectivized

- The aim of the historian is to make explicit the **structural nexus** that underlies the historical event
- This is **an objective task**, because the structural nexus can be made explicit, only on the basis of certain formal models that allow us to reconstruct (analyse) those aspects of our lived experience that contain the respective structural nexus
- The method in question here is based on abstract models on the way how mental processes emerge
- In order to adopt this method, one has to **study these abstract models and carry out an objective (purely structural) reconstruction** of the structural nexus

**B**

# Descriptive psychology: the mathematics of the human sciences

A psychology that begins with a descriptive and analytic method, and is conscious of the limits of explanative constructions, using them only secondarily, and in such a way that they do not become the basis for other hypothetical explanations, is both necessary and possible. Such a psychology will become the foundation of the human sciences, just as mathematics grounds the natural sciences. By means of a healthy interchange with the experiential human sciences, psychology will become well rounded. By carefully determining its concepts and giving them stable designations [on the one hand], it will gradually produce a common scientific terminology for the human sciences. On the other hand, it will prepare for explanative monographs by gathering materials, by describing the systems of psychic life, and by devoting itself to detailed analyses. It will facilitate the control of its hypotheses.

p. 193

A

B



# The 1886/87 proposal

- In the final six pages of his 1886 speech *Poetic imagination and insanity* (p. 96-102) Dilthey formulated the essential formal ingredients of his descriptive psychology
- An extended version of this passage was published one year later, in the context of his essay *The imagination of the poet: Elements for a Poetics* (p. 166-176)
- **These passages are absolutely crucial, because only here Dilthey explains the essential formal features of his conception**

Images

Higher order  
images

Metamor-  
phosis

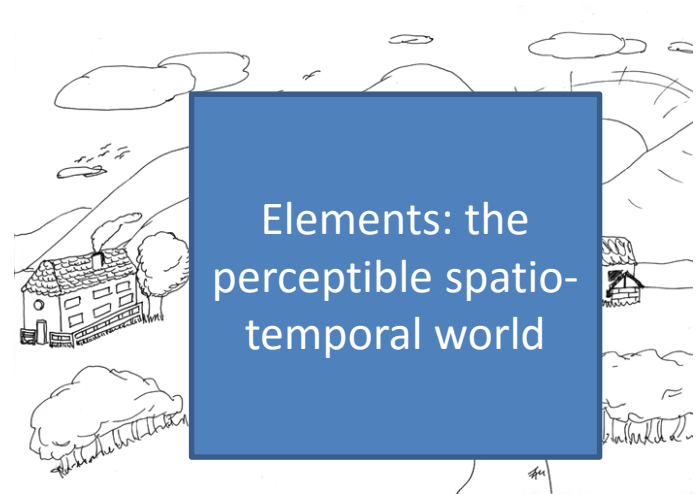
Simple images

Perception

Dilthey's  
1886/1887  
proposal

Elements: the  
perceptible spatio-  
temporal world

# Dilthey's 1886/1887 proposal



# Elements

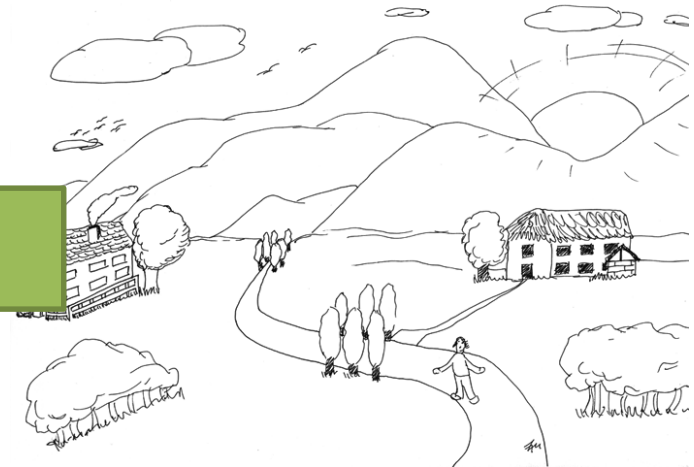
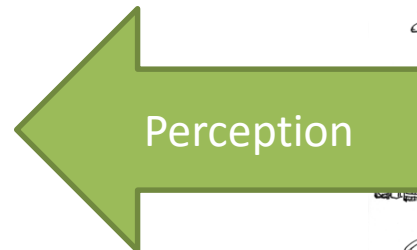
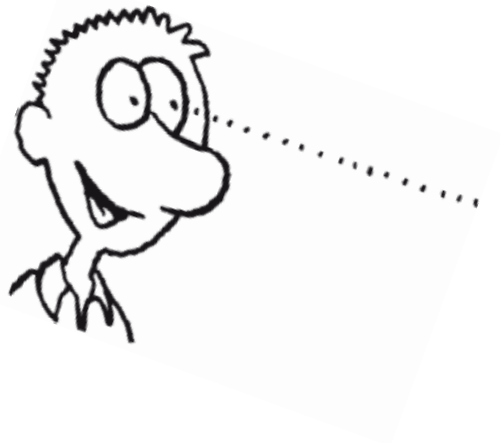
- **For Dilthey, the mind does not consist of any recurring elements, whatsoever**
- *Elements*, by contrast, are only and exclusively to be found in the spatio-temporal, material world
- The perceptible spatio-temporal world provides the elements of cognition

*All products of psychic life, including literature, are composed of perceptions as their elements.*

p. 164

This tenet is established through the following consideration: Even when acts of will, scientific inventions, or artistic images transcend what is real, we will not be able to find any constituents in them that could not be drawn from perception

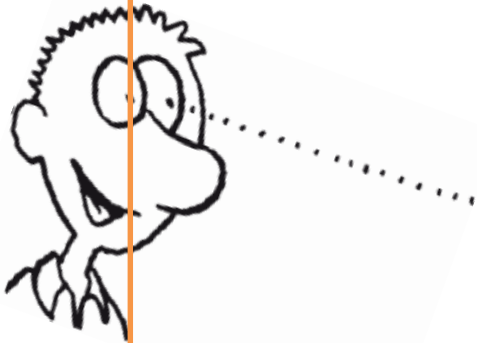
# Dilthey's 1886/1887 proposal



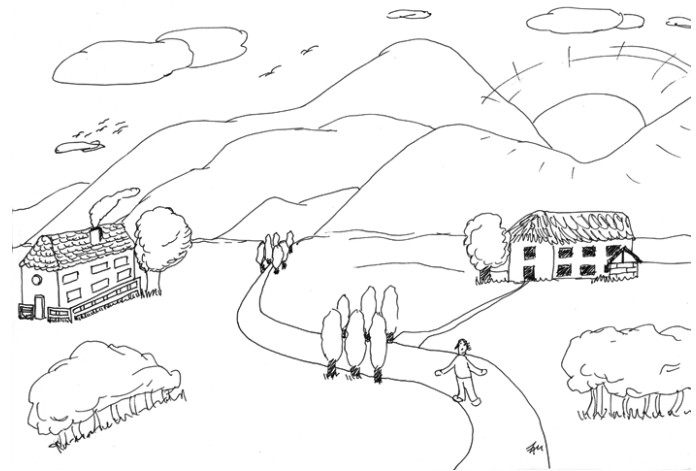
# Perception: a task for the natural sciences

- For Dilthey, the study of perception is primarily a task for the natural sciences (therefore, he does not discuss this aspect in his 1886/1887 proposal)
- Cf. Dilthey's **1892 realism essay**: it is a causal process that leads from the perceptible parts of the spatio-temporal world to those mental pictures representing them
- The entire process is empirical, however, with the inclusion of all kinds of abstract notions being involved here:
  - Color terms, natural kind terms
  - Causality (against Helmholtz)
- **Note also that the 1892 essay and several other writings (e.g., GS XXI, XXII) demonstrate that Dilthey was extremely well-informed about all kinds of current developments in the field of experimental psychology (interactions with Wilhelm His, Helmholtz etc.)**

Images



# Dilthey's 1886/1887 proposal



„In the real mental life, the fate of an image, i.e., an undismantled singular representation [unzerlegte Einzelvorstellung], hinges on the feelings and the distribution of apperception. The image thus obtains an instinct-like energy. It is life, process. It develops, unfolds itself and vanishes again. The same image no more returns than a fallen off leaf in the new spring.“

Dilthey  
1886,  
p. 99

These processes are not as different from those of memory as is usually assumed. Every memory image is constituted from acquired constituents, but the momentary state of consciousness determines which of these constituents are employed in the formation of the image. For the same image can no more return than the same leaf can grow back on a tree the following spring. If I make present in imagination a person who is absent, the current state of my consciousness determines the position of the figure and the expression on his face.

Dilthey  
1887,  
p. 172



# Undismantled singular representations

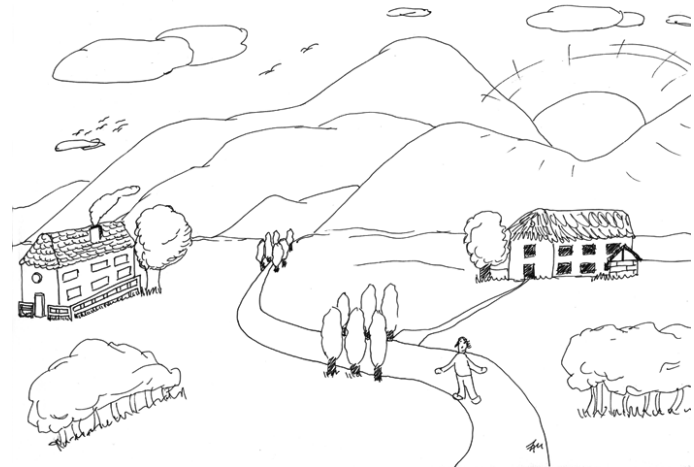
- Images do not disintegrate into ideas like a wall disintegrates into bricks
- Images are non-recurring, atomic
- Images refer to other images, they are related to other images
- These relations between images are the only basis for their analysis
- Cf. Carnap's „elementary experiences“ in the *Aufbau*
  - E.e. are non-recurring, atomic
  - Only recollected similarities between e.e. allow us to analyse them
  - „Quasi-analysis“, rather than „analysis“

Higher order  
images

Metamor-  
phosis

Simple images

# Dilthey's 1886/1887 proposal



*The images of reality consisting of these elements, and the connections among such images which obtain in reality, are freely transformed by the creativity of the poet, unrestricted by the conditions of reality. This creativity is therefore akin to dreams and other related states, including insanity.*

p. 165

Then, through a process of metamorphosis, images receive a shape which diverges from reality, and even when transformed in this way, they are accompanied by an illusion. Images are transformed under the influence of feelings. They are shaped by our emotions, just as the uncertain outlines of rocks and trees are transformed by the influence of the emotions of a traveler in the woods at night.

p. 166

- Metamorphosis transforms roots into serpents
- The same principle also involves abstract reasoning and abstract concept formation of all kinds (cf. axioms for image transformation [skipped here])

6.

Ebbinghaus and Windelband, again

# 1. Dilthey entirely rejects explanative psychology and recommends to replace it with descriptive psychology

- This is simply not true!
- Rather, Dilthey proposes DP as his solution to „the problem of a psychological foundation for the human sciences“
- Although this is the headline of chapter one of Dilthey's essay and becomes reiterated dozens of times, Ebbinghaus entirely ignores this aspect of Dilthey's essay
- Only because Ebbinghaus ignores the core message of Dilthey's essay he can play the card of the modern experimental scientist who
  - lectures an arm chair philosopher who is simply too stupid to understand the direction of modern science
  - rejects the somewhat megalomaniac attempt of an old-fashioned representative of a bygone age of (human) science to get rid of the natural sciences

## 2. Dilthey's definition of EP as being based on „a limited number of univocally determined elements“ is obscure, if not absurd.

- This definition only holds for rational psychology and associative psychology, not for modern scientific psychology in the broader sense
- Dilthey fails to make this ambiguity of his notion of EP explicit
- Therefore, Ebbinghaus simply could not see what kind of aspects Dilthey was criticizing here
- There is a serious flaw, in Dilthey's paper here, but if one reads Dilthey carefully (together with his earlier writings), the flaw become easily fixed
- Ebbinghaus misunderstood Dilthey, simply because he was not willing to study him carefully

### 3. Dilthey thinks that causality is a matter of inner experience

- A misunderstanding, again. One has to read the passage that E. quotes in its context:

The connectedness p. 194

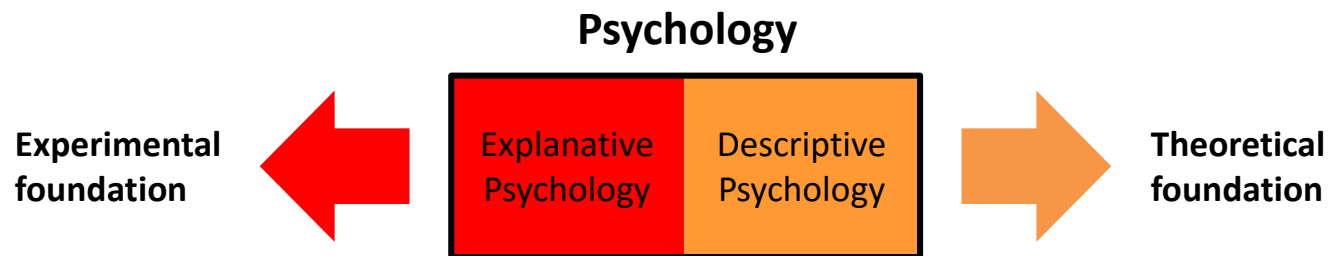
that our perceiving sees and our thinking posits is therefore drawn from our own inner life. Even causal equations are partial contents of this living nexus. For the latter also includes the relations of necessity and of identity. But at every point it includes more than that. We cannot create a nexus that exceeds the one given to us.

- What Dilthey says here is that there is nothing in the human mind that is *not* empirical, i.e., part of the lived experience
- He does not say, however, that causal relations are established by means of inner experience, i.e., at an extra-empirical level

4. The systematic part of Dilthey's essay is much too brief and sketchy
  - Fair enough! But Dilthey assumes the reader to be familiar with his earlier writings, in particular, those from 1886/1887
  - E. obviously was not familiar with these writings
5. Dilthey identifies EP with an outdated variety, namely, associative psychology and therefore he criticizes a variety of EP that EP itself no longer defends but rather overcame (in exactly the same direction Dilthey is up to)
6. Dilthey's accusations to EP basically only hold for another outdated historical appearance of psychology, namely, Herbart (p. 179-186)
  - In both cases, the point is that Dilthey is criticizing these instances of EP because they are important forerunners to his own conception of DP
  - It is not true, in turn, that Dilthey ignores the subsequent developments in EP (cf. our considerations on EPB)

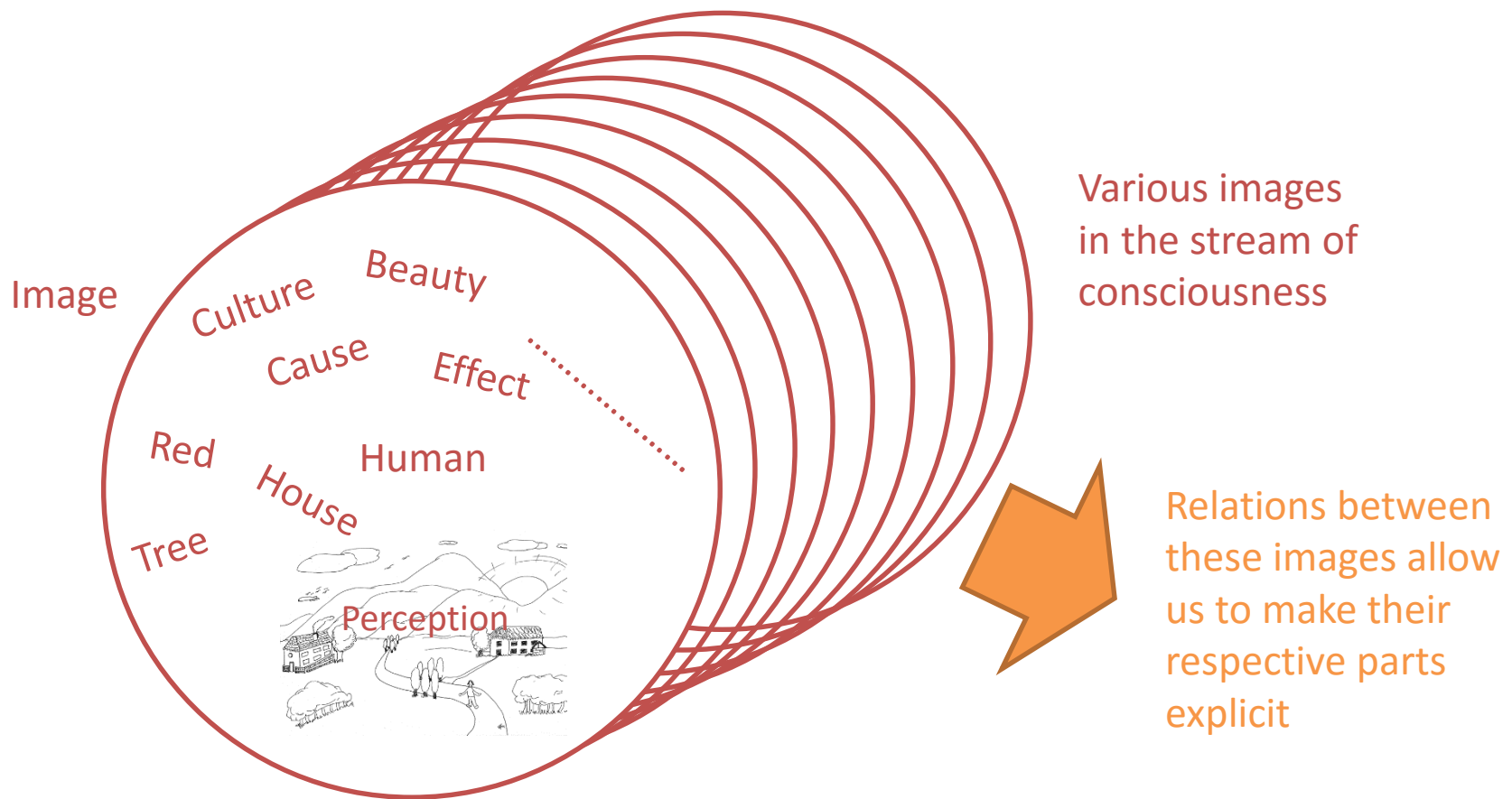


7. E.'s **main systematic point (p. 186-196)**: Dilthey's conception is based on analogical conclusions and indirect extrapolations of structural nexuses. Therefore, there is no real difference between EP and DP (p. 196)
- True: DP is only another perspective at the same matters of facts as EP is concerned with
  - False: The very axiomatic standpoint DP proposes is not identical with the experimental standpoint of EP. Therefore, there is a real difference between DP and EP.
  - Ultimately, however, DP and EP are two aspects of the same thing. They fit together like experimental and theoretical physics: DP is theoretical psychology, EP is experimental psychology



## 7. The structural nexus is not a matter of lived experience

- „Lived experience“ is basically a *holistic* notion
- The images of lived experience contain everything: spatio-temporal perceptions, concepts that embrace spatio-temporal perceptions directly (tree, chair, red), and more abstract notions such as the notion of cause and effect
- All these things belong to our lived experience
- But none of these things are automatically made explicit



- Every aspect of the stream of consciousness is part of our lived experience, i.e., empirical (even the most abstract one)
- However, every single notion being part of an image can be made explicit only in the course of a subsequent process of reconstruction, i.e., indirectly (Ebbinghaus: „become guessed, deduced backwards, supplementary construed”)

9. „In its outlines, the method of psychology is in best order. The Diltheyian attack, therefore, runs as a shot into the air; a chain of crooked characterizations, obscurities, unfairnesses he delivers, rather than new and fruitful results.“ (p. 202-3)

- In his review, Ebbinghaus (a) entirely ignores Dilthey's approach being part of his, Dilthey's, project of a psychological foundation for the human sciences and (b) misreads it as the proposal to replace EP with DP
- Ebbinghaus, it seems, simply does not see that Dilthey's conception is part of a non-reductionist understanding of the human sciences
- Ebbinghaus's criticism is a chain of misunderstandings and misrepresentations of Dilthey's conception
- Thus, the above qualification is simply unfair

# There were some points of agreement between Windelband and Dilthey ...

- Like Dilthey, Windelband was interested in the development of an independent realm of human or cultural sciences
- Like Dilthey, he took a hermeneutic stance, rejecting any attempt to reduce the human sciences to the natural sciences
- Like Dilthey, Windelband defended historicism or descriptivism: history mainly describes the world, rather than explaining it

# ... but nevertheless their accounts ultimately diverge heavily

- For Windelband, the only value the natural sciences have for the human sciences is the determination of historical events (e.g., determination of the age of a mummy)
- Unlike Dilthey, W. rejects *all kinds of causal explanations* in history (even those that concern singular events)
- Moreover, W. rejects all kinds of independent empirical methods for the human sciences
- Rather, W. claims that the only independent method for the human sciences is an a priori method (which allows for an a priori foundation of both the human and the natural sciences)
- This method is philosophical (whatever that means: cf. also the approaches of Brentano, Husserl, etc.)

7.

Caught in the middle:  
the decline of descriptive psychology

# Criticism from both sides

- Ebbinghaus's criticism had devastating consequences, for Dilthey's research programm: until today, Ebbinghaus's review is widely understood as providing conclusive evidence that Dilthey simply failed to understand psychology properly
- But Windelband's criticism had no less fatal consequences, for Dilthey (although D. is not even mentioned in W.s essay): philosophers subsequently took Dilthey to be a representative of a flawed and self-contradictory empiricism and positivism



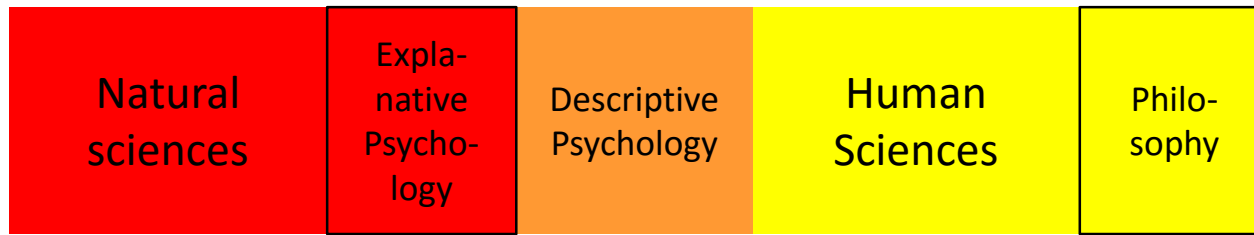
# Psychologism: purification at work

- Martin Kusch (1995) highlighted the role that the occupation of philosophy chairs by experimental psychologists had for the development of anti-psychologism in Germany at the end of the 19th century
- Interdisciplinary accounts of psychology and philosophy become rejected and purification took place
- The interdisciplinary philosopher Dilthey became caught in the middle; his conception was rejected
  - a. by the purified experimental psychologist Ebbinghaus
  - b. by the purified philosopher Windelband

# Sociological factors, rather than personal motives

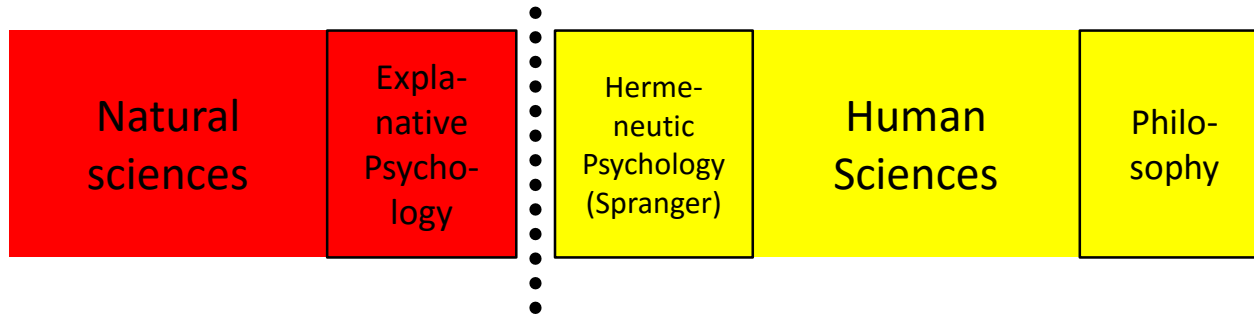
- Frithjof Rodi (1987) highlighted the role that personal motives might have tempted Ebbinghaus to formulate his attack on Dilthey (Ebbinghaus had to leave Berlin and made Dilthey responsible for this)
- Although this is plausible, the sociological perspective should not be ignored here – this is even more true for the case of Windelband (who hardly had any personal reasons to attack Dilthey)
- The aim of both Ebbinghaus and Windelband was to keep psychology and the human sciences apart
- The decline of descriptive psychology was the inevitable result of their successful attempts

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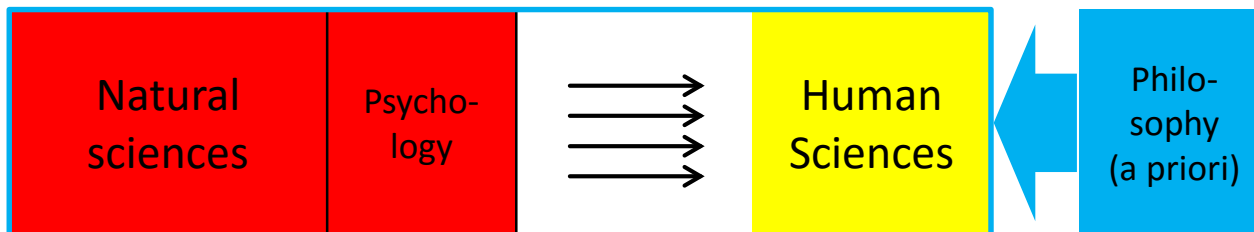


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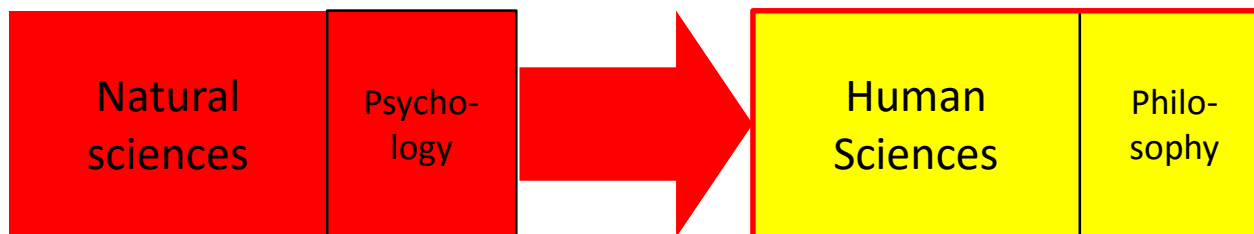
?



Spranger  
Bollnow  
Gadamer  
Habermas  
etc.



Phenomenology  
Brentano School  
Analytic Philosophy



Human sciences as  
natural sciences:  
epistemology  
naturalized