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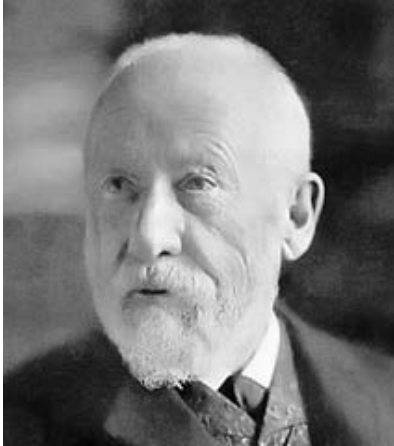
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# What is descriptive psychology? Ebbinghaus's 1896 criticism of Dilthey revisited

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## Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911)



### SITZUNGSBERICHTE

DER

KÖNIGLICH PREUSSISCHEN

AKADEMIE DER WISSENSCHAFTEN

ZU BERLIN.

JAHRGANG 1894.

### Ideen über eine beschreibende und zergliedernde Psychologie.

VON W. DILTHEY.

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

## Hermann Ebbinghaus (1850-1909)



### Zeitschrift

für

### Psychologie

und

### Physiologie der Sinnesorgane.

Hamburg und Leipzig,

Verlag von Leopold Voss.

1896.

Über erklärende und beschreibende Psychologie.

Von

HERM. EBBINGHAUS.

# Overview

1. The criticism of Ebbinghaus
2. Dilthey on descriptive psychology in 1894, 1862 and 1886
  - A. What's wrong with hypotheses? – Dilthey on Buckle in 1862 and Windelband on Dilthey in 1894
  - B. A limited number of Elements – Dilthey on Explanative Psychology
  - C. Descriptive Psychology – the 1886/87 proposal
3. Ebbinghaus again
4. Conclusions

1.

# The criticism of Ebbinghaus

# Ebbinghaus's criticism: major points

1. Dilthey entirely rejects explanative psychology and recommends to replace it with descriptive psychology
  - [1] for Dilthey EP „follows a wrong ideal“ (p. 161)
  - [2] for D. the „transfer of natural scientific methods to psychology is mistaken“ (p. 162)
  - [3] D. holds that in psychology „hypotheses cannot have the same importance as they have in the natural sciences“ (p. 164)
  - [4] D. holds that „these insights recently [...] led to an entire bankruptcy and to a fundamental disintegration of explanative psychology“ (p. 166)

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 (rather than spatio-temporal facts) (p. 163)
4. Dilthey identifies EP with an outdated variety, namely, associative psychology and therefore he criticizes a variety of EP that EP itself no longer defends but rather overcame (in exactly the same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) (p. 175-178)
5. Dilthey's accusations to EP, in turn, only hold for another outdated historical appearance of psychology, namely, Herbart (p. 179-186)

6. **[E.'s main systematic point (p. 186-196)]**: Dilthey's conception is based on analogical conclusions and indirect extrapolations of structural nexuses [Strukturzusammenhänge]. Therefore, there is no real difference between EP and DP
7. [5] „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)
8. The systematic part of Dilthey's essay is much too brief and sketchy (p. 173)
9. [6] „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)

2.

# Dilthey on descriptive psychology in 1894, 1862 and 1886



# Toward a Psychological Foundation for the Human Sciences

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.

- Dilthey rejects explanative psychology (EP) as being not suited as a method for the human sciences and develops descriptive psychology (DP) as a replacement
- In other words, it is only with respect to its abilities as a foundational tool for the humanities that Dilthey criticizes EP

# Explanative Psychology:

a „causal system“ of „hypotheses“

- EP [7] „has erected a causal system, claiming to make all mental phenomena intelligible.“ (p. 139)
- But: [8] „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.“ (p. 142)
- [9] „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!“ (p. 143)

A.

What's wrong with hypotheses?  
Dilthey on Buckle in 1862 and  
Windelband on Dilthey in 1894

# 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):

[10] [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)

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

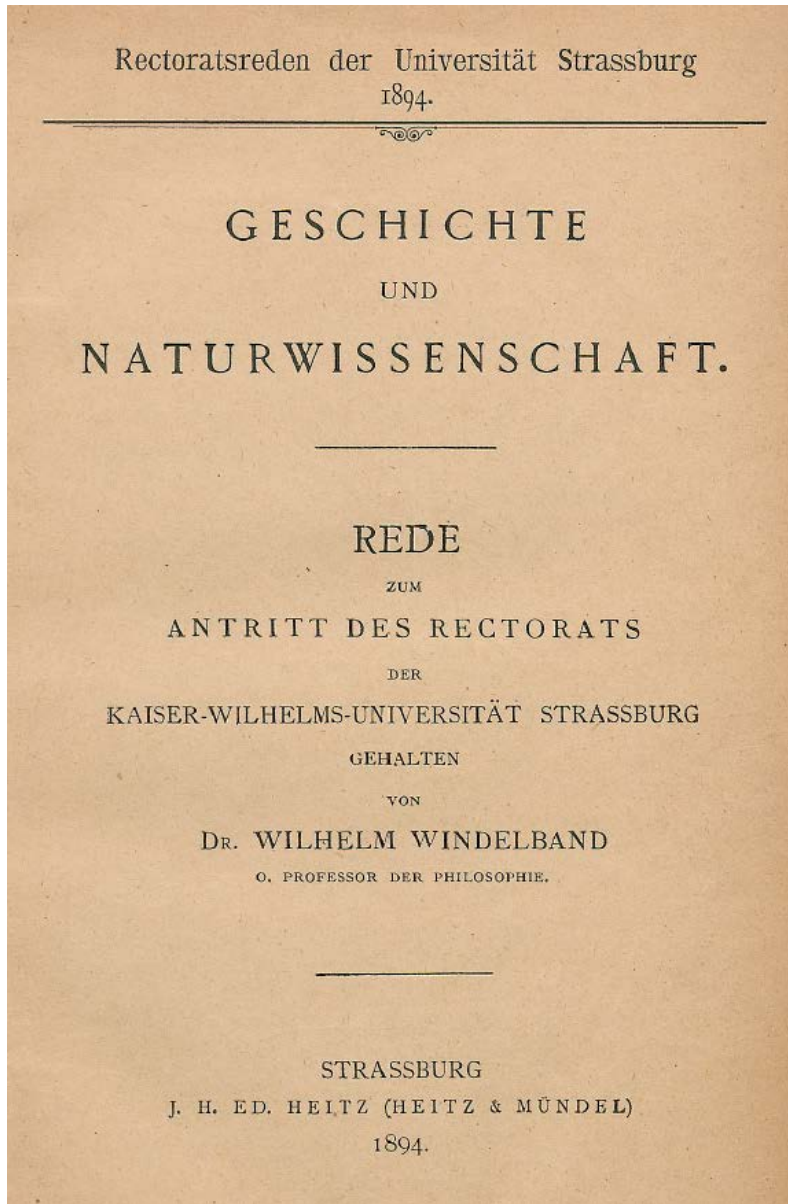
Nevertheless, we are entitled to talk of contingency, in a relative way, both in the natural sciences and in history. If on a beautiful day we unexpectedly become surprised by a rain shower, we call this a bad coincidence, although we know that for a more comprehensive knowledge this rain shower stand 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. (p. 102)

# 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

# But still: the human sciences are based on the natural sciences (against W.)

- [12] „To a great extent, however, the human sciences do encompass natural facts and are based on knowledge of nature.“ (Dilthey 1883, p. 14)
- [13] „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)
- Windelband’s distinction between nomothetical and idiographical sciences makes it impossible to understand mental processes as empirical processes



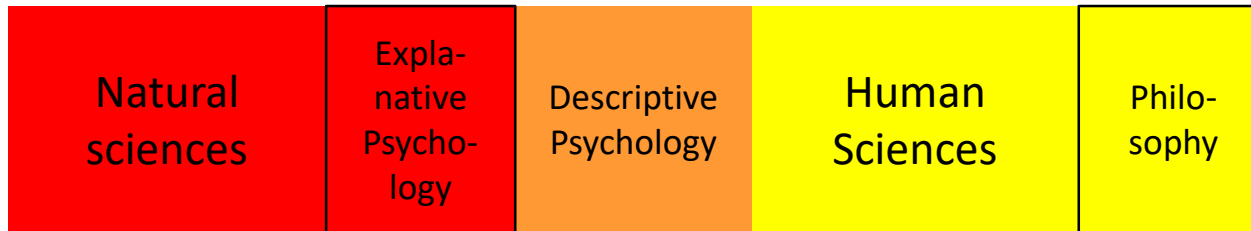
- Already in 1894 (actually, before the publication of Dilthey's essay) another criticism of Dilthey's conception appeared
- Windelband entirely rejected the idea of descriptive psychology
- He criticized Dilthey from the standpoint of the human sciences („Kulturwissenschaften“)



# Windelband 1894: Science, cut into pieces

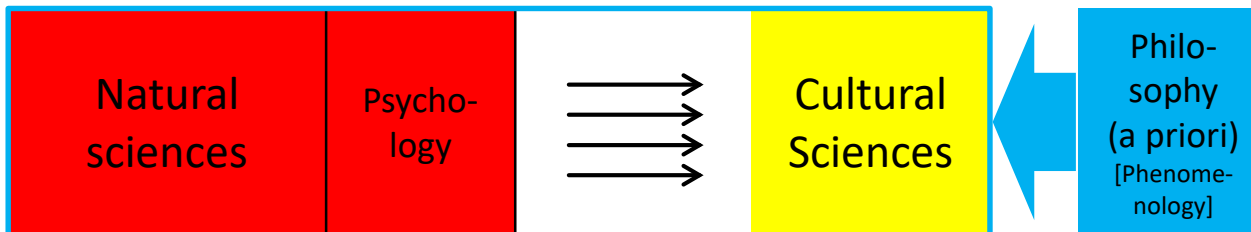
- a. Psychology, in its entirety belongs to the natural sciences
- b. The cultural sciences, on the other hand, are entirely non-psychological
- c. The natural sciences support the cultural sciences only insofar as they allow us to carry out singular facts (e.g., determination of the age of a mummy)
- d. 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)

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



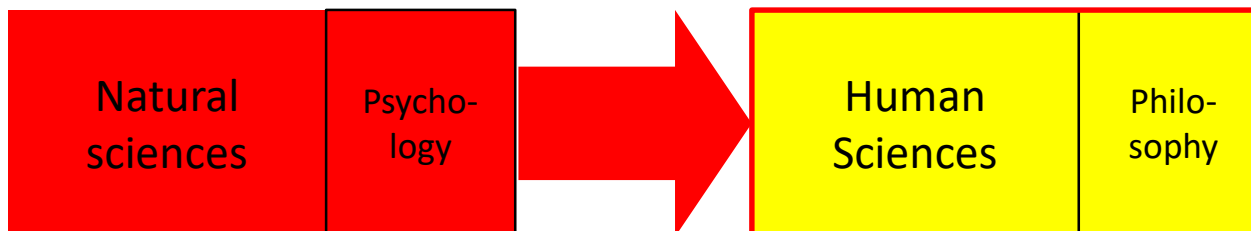
Hum. sc. mainly describe; however, they search for causal explanations for singular events and are insofar based on the nat. sc.

## 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.

**B.**

**A limited number of elements –  
Dilthey on explanative psychology**

# A limited number of elements

[14] „the distinguishing characteristic of explanative psychology lies in the conviction that it can derive a comprehensive and transparent cognition for psychic phenomena from a limited number of univocally determined elements.“ (Dilthey 1894, p. 139)

- 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:

- In the case of EP in the metaphysical sense:  
→ a limited number of axioms
- In the case of EP in the narrower sense:  
→ a limited number of ideas (copies of s-t-objects)
- In the case of EP in the broader sense:  
→ *no* „limited number“ but natural science only provides „causal explanations“, „it concerns itself only with possibility and aims only at a kind of probability“
- This is not a problem, to be sure, but the human sciences *mainly serve a descriptive purpose*:

[15] „Nature we explain, but psychic life we understand“ (p. 144)

C.  
Descriptive Psychology –  
the 1886/87 proposal

# 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

Metamorphosis

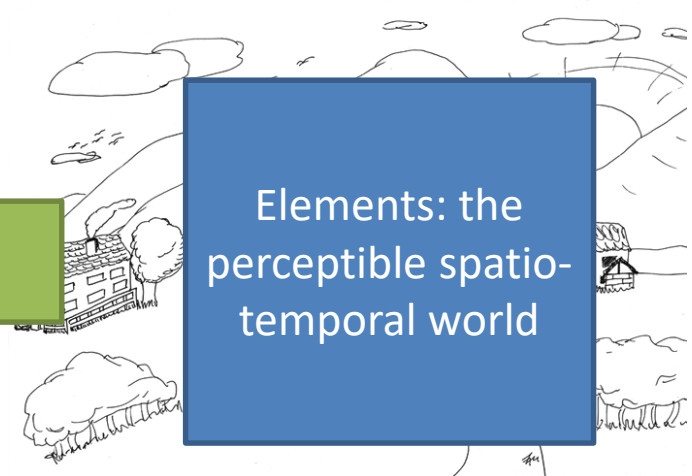
Simple images

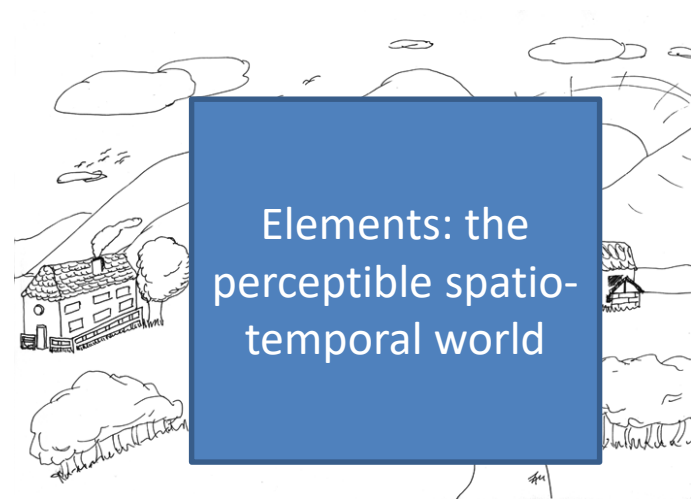
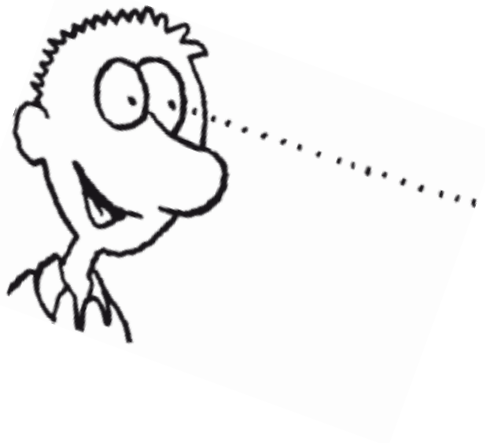


# Dilthey's 1886/1887 proposal

Elements: the perceptible spatio-temporal world

Perception

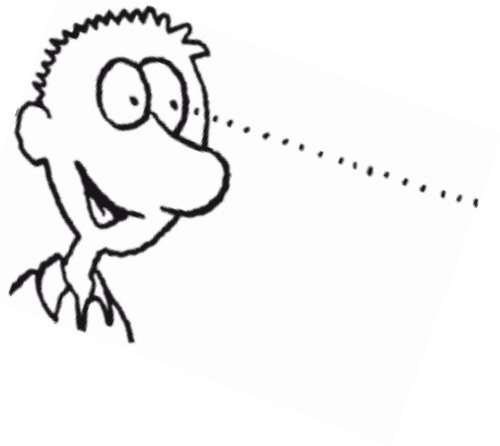




# Elements

- **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

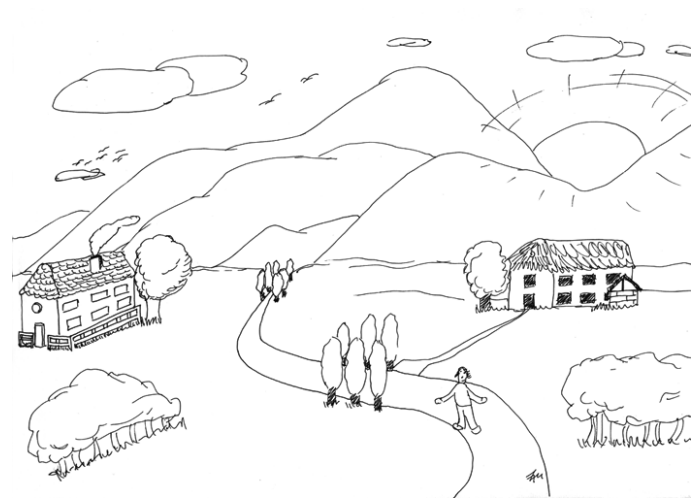
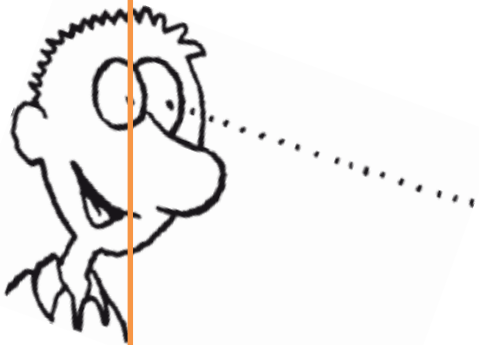
[16] „All products of psychic life are composed of perceptions as their elements. Even Dante’s and Milton’s narratives of hellish flames had ad disposal only that fire that burns in every kitchen.“ (p. 96)



# 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, Causality)
- [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.) ... Hans-Ulrich Lessing ...]

# Images



# Undismantled singular representations

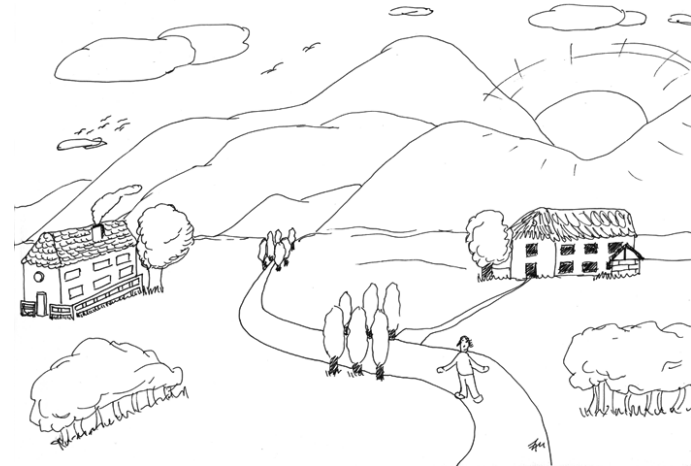
[17] „In the real mental life, the fate of an image, i.e., an undismantled singular representation [unzerlegte Einzelvorstellung], hinges on the feelings and the distribution of apperception. The image thus obtains an instinct-like energy. It is life, process. It develops, unfolds itself and vanishes again. The same image no more returns than a fallen off leaf in the new spring.“  
(Dilthey 1886, p. 99)

- Images do not disintegrate into ideas like a wall disintegrates into bricks
- Images are non-recurring, atomic
- Relations between images are the only basis for their analysis (cf. Carnap's „elementary experiences“)

Higher order  
images



Simple images





# Metamorphosis

[18] „Then, through a process of metamorphosis, images receive a shape which diverges from reality [...]. 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.“ (Dilthey 1887, p. 166)

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

3.

# Ebbinghaus 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
  - 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 becomes 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

- One has to read the passage that E. quotes in its context:

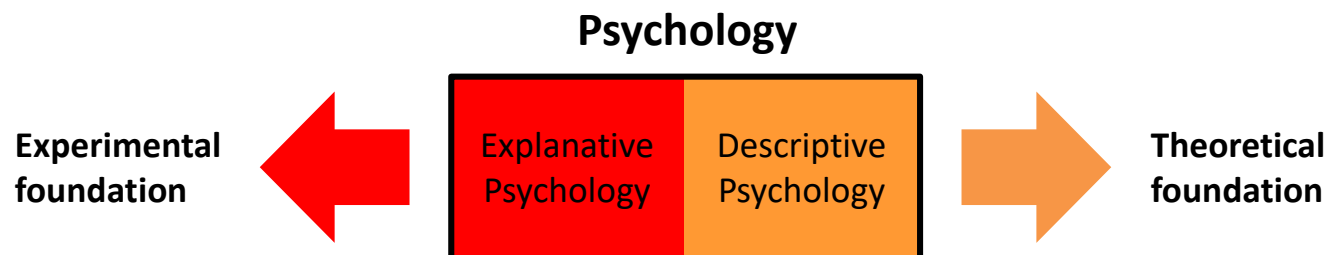
[19] „The connectedness that our perceiving sees and our thinking posits is therefore drawn from our own inner life. Even causal equations are partial contents of this living nexus. For the latter also includes the relations of necessity and of identity. But at every point it includes more than that. We cannot create a nexus that exceeds the one given to us. (Dilthey 1894, p. 194)

- What Dilthey says here is that there is nothing in the human mind that is *not* empirical, i.e., part of the lived experience
- Dilthey is turning the tables here: from the standpoint of inner experience even reasoning that considers external experience (i.e., the natural sciences) become a matter of the living nexus
- Cf. what was later called „externalization“

4. 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)
5. Dilthey's accusations to EP, in turn, 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)

**6. 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 sides of the same coin. They fit together like experimental and theoretical physics: DP is theoretical psychology, EP is experimental psychology



7. „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)

- Dilthey 1886/87 teaches us that this is exactly what Dilthey has in mind.
- „Lived experience“ is basically a holistic notion
- 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“)



8. 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
  
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 does not (want to) see that Dilthey's conception is part of a non-reductionist understanding of the human sciences
  - Ebbinghaus's criticism absolutely misses the point of Dilthey's essay

4.

# Conclusions

# Caught in the middle between experimental psychology and aprioristic philosophy

- 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 address): 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 became rejected and purification took place
- The interdisciplinary philosopher Dilthey became caught in the middle; his conception was rejected
  - a. by the purified experimental psychologists
  - b. by the purified philosophers

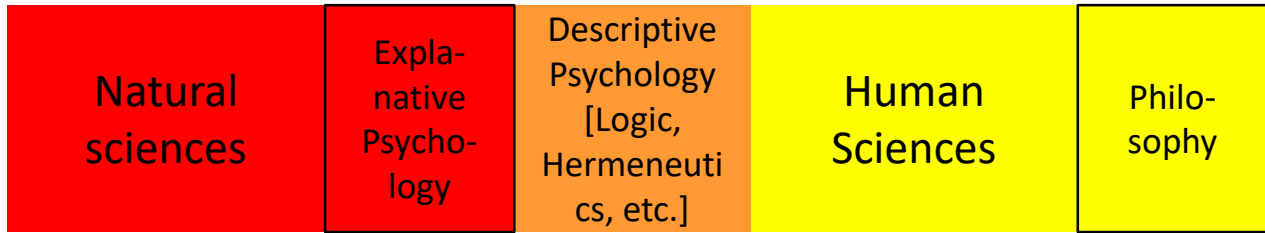
# Sociological factors, rather than personal motives

- 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

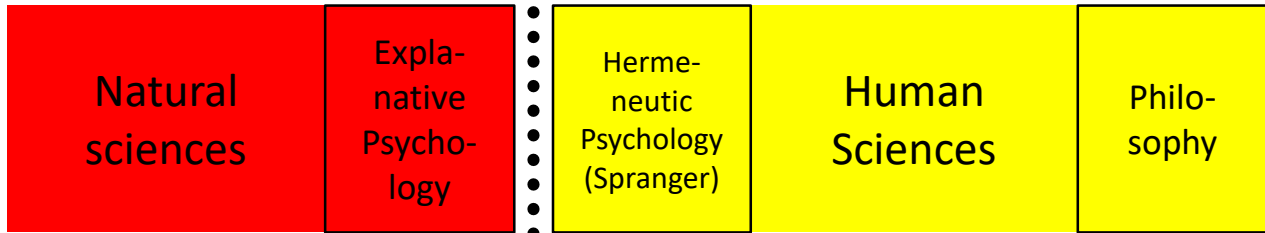
# But, after all: What is descriptive psychology?

**A method that allows us to reconstruct the development of abstract mental content and therefore provides an empirical foundation to philosophy and the human sciences.**

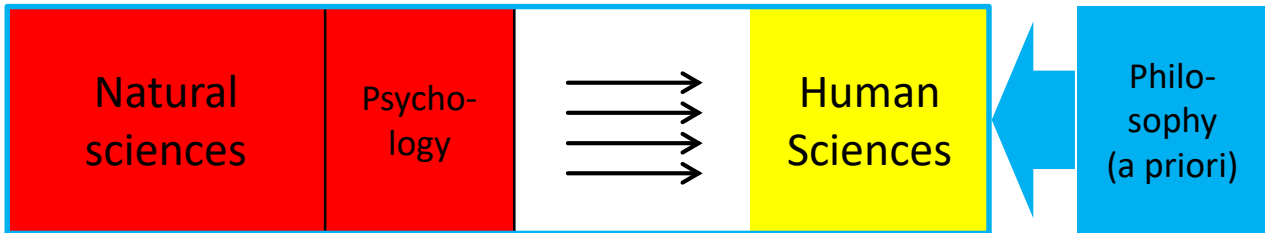
Cf. also  
„logic“  
„hermeneutics“  
„sociology of knowledge“



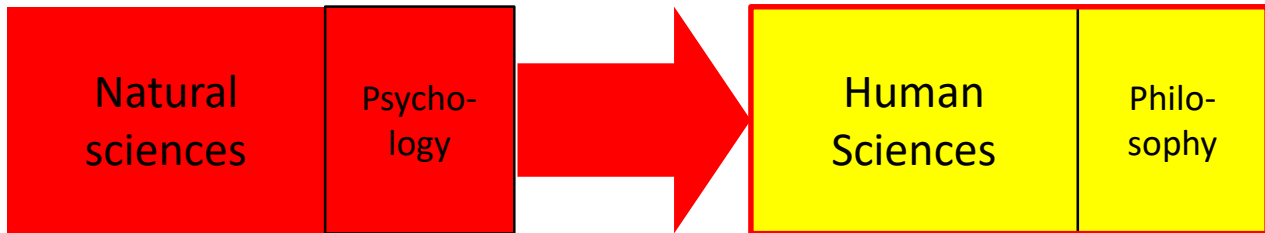
[future]  
SSK?  
Logic?  
Hermeneutics?



Spranger  
Bollnow  
Gadamer  
Habermas  
etc.



Phenomenology  
Brentano School  
Analytic Philosophy



Human sciences as  
natural sciences:  
epistemology  
naturalized