What is Descriptive Psychology? Ebbinghaus’s 1896 Criticism of Dilthey Revisited

This paper re-evaluates Hermann Ebbinghaus’s famous criticism of Wilhelm Dilthey’s 1894 essay “Ideas for a Descriptive and Analytic Psychology” to determine in which sense Dilthey’s various approaches toward philosophy and the human sciences are related to experimental psychology and hypothetico-deductive science. It turns out that Ebbinghaus falsely accuses Dilthey of rejecting experimental psychology overall, while Dilthey only rejects a specific misuse of experimental psychology as a means for foundation of the humanities. At the same time, however, Dilthey appreciates several different aspects where philosophy and the human sciences might benefit from experimental psychology. On the other hand, Dilthey’s descriptive psychology, though clearly ruling out experimental psychology, nevertheless involves a hypothetico-deductive standpoint that somewhat intermediates between modern social science and 19th century hermeneutics.

1. Introduction

In February and June of 1894, Wilhelm Dilthey delivered his essay “Ideas for a Descriptive and Analytic Psychology” as a lecture to the Prussian Academy of Science. These lectures were published in the fall of that year in the academy’s journal Sitzungsberichte. This publication was already somewhat overshadowed by the publication of Wilhelm Windelband’s inaugural address as rector of the University of Strasbourg from May 1894 “History and the Natural Sciences”, which became also published that year (Windelband 1894; Patton 2015; Luft 2016; Damböck 2017, 42-47). Though not coining the name Dilthey in his lecture at all, Windelband fundamentally criticizes the entire picture that was drawn by Dilthey of the relationship between the human sciences (HS) and the natural sciences (NS).
For Windelband, these two fields must be kept separate without having any joint method whatsoever. He insists that psychology belongs to the NS and cannot play any role in the field of HS at all.

Dilthey was obviously disappointed by this criticism. In response, he opened his next presentation to the Prussian Academy viz. the essay “On Comparative Psychology” with a criticism of Windelband that was unusually explicit and harsh (and important to be mentioned, also explicitly called Windelband by name). The presentation took place in May 1895 and should have been published in the fall of that year in the Sitzungsberichte. However, immediately before the planned publication, a review of Dilthey’s 1894 essay by the psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus appeared and was sent to Dilthey by the author together with a somewhat acidic accompanying letter: “I was actually unprepared”, Ebbinghaus said, “on so much unfairness against recent psychology and so little clarity on the fact that what you recommend people to do is in fact what people do for a long time already.”

Facing these criticisms from two entirely different scientific camps, Dilthey decided to stick his head in the sand. He removed the Windelband critique from the 1895 essay and started the essay with a rather shallow and indifferent remark on the Ebbinghaus essay. Only this new version—which now contained no reaction to Windelband at all and only a somewhat ridiculous reaction to Ebbinghaus—was finally published in the Sitzungsberichte in March 1896. Dilthey never managed to say a word against Ebbinghaus or Windelband in public. Therefore, the case was considered finished and settled. For example, Husserl (like many others) took the lesson from the one-sided exchange that Ebbinghaus conclusively refuted Dilthey (Rodi 2003, 183). This narrative also seems to have influenced historians of psychology who until recent times widely ignore Dilthey together with the Völkerpsychologie of Steinthal, Lazarus, and Cohen. Twentieth century historians of philosophy however, though mostly ignoring Lazarus and Steinthal as well as the psychology of Cohen, frequently
mention Dilthey. These philosophical approaches, however, either saw Dilthey and Husserl as closely aligned (viewing the former as a forerunner of the latter (Misch 1967; Lessing 1984, 192f)) or considered Dilthey and DP as an example of positivism (Habermas 1973, 178-233; Gadamer 1990, I, 222-269 and II, 227-236).

Only in recent decades have there been approaches that reject the positivism accusation but also highlight the distance between Dilthey and Husserl. Rudolf Makkreel, for example, in his classical Dilthey study, unequivocally points out that “it is hermeneutics rather than Husserlian phenomenology that provides the controlling framework in Dilthey’s matured theory of psychology and the human studies” (Makkreel 1975, 273). Similar thoughts that highlight the empirical nature of Dilthey’s account as being incompatible with Husserl’s apriorism can be found in (Ermarth 1978, 197-209; Bulhof 1980, 95-99); more recently (Beiser 2011, 358-364). However, while these approaches share my perspective, they do not appreciate all relevant aspects of Dilthey’s take on experimental psychology. Thus, the following questions arise: If Dilthey is neither a “positivist” nor a (Proto-)Husserlian but rather belongs to the tradition of 19th century hermeneutics: What role does experimental psychology then play in his various approaches toward philosophy and the foundation of the HS? What role does the hypothetico-deductive standpoint specifically play in Dilthey’s approaches? (He seems to reject the latter in his 1894 essay.) This paper tries to answer these questions based on a re-evaluation of Ebbinghaus’s critique of Dilthey’s 1894 essay.

In order to grasp Ebbinghaus’s critique, let us now start with a brief examination of the key points of his essay. Ebbinghaus’s reconstruction of Dilthey’s essay is a polemical masterpiece because it encapsulates the most devastating points of his criticism in indirect quotations from Dilthey, which foist the polemical content of the critique to the text of his target. This is true, in particular, for the main point of Ebbinghaus’s critique, which he formulates at the very beginning of his essay. Ebbinghaus holds:
The prevalent psychology, in Dilthey’s opinion, follows a wrong ideal (p. 161). The entire transfer of natural scientific methods to psychology is mistaken according to Dilthey (p. 162). For Dilthey, hypotheses cannot have the same importance in the field of psychology as they have in the natural sciences (p. 164). Very recently, these insights, according to Dilthey, led to bankruptcy and a fundamental disintegration of explanatory psychology (p. 166).

For our subsequent argumentation, it is extremely important to note that Ebbinghaus diagnoses here that the rejection of what Dilthey calls “explanatory psychology” (EP) also means that Dilthey rejects experimental psychology (EXP) as a whole. Thus, Ebbinghaus’s main point of criticism is that Dilthey somewhat defends an almost grotesquely reactionary—and as it turns out from the below cited second argument of Ebbinghaus, also self-contradictory—conception of psychology that tries to remove every aspect from psychology that stems from the NS.

The second key argument in Ebbinghaus’s essay, in paraphrase, is the following:

*The method of DP as being proposed by Dilthey rejects hypotheses, but in contradiction to this, still uses explanations. Therefore, Dilthey envisions an alternative here that simply does not exist; his entire approach “runs as a shot into the air”; the distinction between DP and EP ultimately collapses.* (p. 186–203)

Of course there are also some further important points of criticism in Ebbinghaus’s essay; for example, he is accusing Dilthey of thinking that causality is a matter of inner experience (p. 163), and he highlights that Dilthey is mainly criticizing certain outdated varieties of EP such as associative psychology and the psychology of Herbart (pp. 175–86). Furthermore,
Ebbinghaus claims DP to be a method that is used by EP all the time (p. 178). However, for the sake of the present discussion, and for brevity, I will exclusively focus on the aforementioned two key arguments. In the rest of this paper, I will first provide a rather detailed assessment of the key points of the programmatic first chapter of Dilthey’s 1894 essay together with remarks on their background in earlier writings of Dilthey (section 2). Further clarification is provided in a section on the relationship between DP and hermeneutics in Dilthey’s later work (section 3). On this basis, I will re-evaluate the key points of Ebbinghaus’s critique (section 4).

2. Dilthey’s 1894 essay: The key points of the first chapter and their background in Dilthey’s earlier writings

As Uljana Feest had pointed out, “despite its title, Dilthey’s paper ‘concerning a descriptive and analytic 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” (Feest 2007, 59). In fact, from the start, Dilthey’s approach is restricted to a very special and clearly demarcated philosophical task that is already indicated in the headline of the first section: “The problem of a psychological foundation for the human sciences.” This task is tackled by Dilthey at two different levels. Dilthey demarcates his own psychological approach from (A) natural scientific varieties of psychology, and (B) foundationalist varieties of epistemology that rule out psychology as a whole. Let us discuss these two aspects in detail now.

(A) In Dilthey’s essay, psychology is discussed only insofar as it may serve as a foundational tool for the HS. It is not discussed whatsoever as a natural science in its own right. There is no single passage where Dilthey either criticizes the NS in general or psychology as being part of
the NS. All kinds of criticism that target EP and/or the NS in Dilthey’s essay are only taken to be criticisms of the idea that EP and/or the NS may be foundational tools for the HS. In this regard, Dilthey is starting off his essay highlighting the natural scientific character of EP:

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 (SW II, 113/GS V, 139).

This is to say, EP is a natural science that draws a causal picture of the world and claims “to make all mental phenomena intelligible.” This clearly means that, for Dilthey, EP claims to be suited as a foundational tool for the HS. Taking this for granted, Dilthey immediately moves on to develop his main point of criticism. “An explanative science,” Dilthey points out, “is one that subsumes a phenomenal domain to a causal system by means of a limited number of univocally determined elements that are the constituents of the system” (ibid.). EP, in turn, “can achieve its goal only through a combination of hypotheses” (SW II, 116/GS V, 140). Hypotheses, in turn, lead to a chaos of concurring EP theories: “There ensues a war of all against all, which is no less fierce than that in the field of metaphysics.” (ibid). Therefore, “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” (ibid). “Hypotheses, everywhere only hypotheses!” (SW II, 118/GS V, 143). However, Dilthey immediately adds to this somewhat polemical move that the hypothetical character of EP is a problem only in the context of the specific problems and goals of his essay.

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. 

[...] We do not prove ourselves to be the authentic heirs of the great natural scientists by transferring the methods they invented to our domain, but by adjusting our mode of cognitive inquiry to our own subject-matter and by relating to it as they did to theirs. *Natura parendo vincitur.* (SW II, 119/GS V, 143)

In order to disentangle these somewhat confusing references, it is very important to carefully distinguish Dilthey’s idiosyncratic term *explanative psychology (EP)* from *experimental psychology (EXP)* more broadly taken. Though they share the same method, EXP is characterized by the general idea of a hypothetico-deductive and natural scientific standpoint in psychology whereas EP claims to use that very method as a means for foundation of the HS. Therefore, EP is only one possible variety of EXP among an ocean of other possibilities. Dilthey rejects only this specific variety. He rejects the idea of using EXP as a foundational tool for the HS but at the same time he himself sometimes draws on methods similar to those of EXP.

These crucial though—in the context of the 1894 essay—also somewhat hidden aspects of appreciation of EXP in Dilthey can be identified in four different aspects of his work.

(1) Dilthey thinks that varieties of EXP who restrict themselves to lower mental phenomena, viz., perception and mental images as being directly based on perception, are very relevant and important for the HS and philosophy. This is obvious in his 1890 essay “The Origin of Our Belief in the Reality of the External World and Its Justification” (SW II, 8-57/GS V, 90-138) which partly draws on a story about the relationship between perceptual experience and the external world which is based on the findings of recent physiologists and psychiatrists.

(2) Dilthey even studies higher mental phenomena at a level where EXP becomes at least potentially relevant, i.e., in his 1887 poetics (SW V, 29-174/GS VI, 103-241), Dilthey attempts to develop a theory about the relationship between higher and lower mental
phenomena. This theory is based on the notion of “metamorphosis.” It follows the leads of Goethe and Johannes Müller but also picks up associative psychology to some extent (Makkreel 1975, 90-109, Rodi 1969, 58-79): “All products of psychic life, including literature, are composed of perceptions as their elements.” (SW V, 93/GS VI, 164)

Perceptions allow us to explain how higher mental phenomena arise and develop. However, this does not imply that Dilthey defends EP in his poetics because poetics is by no means intended to function as a fundamental discipline of the HS. Dilthey’s poetics provides an abstract theory about the relationship between higher and lower mental phenomena, whereas the HS do not need a mere abstract take on the higher mental phenomena but rather a conception that allows us to develop concrete understanding of those highly complex mental phenomena that represent the history of mankind. As Dilthey points out in 1894:

As a consequence 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 (SW II, 119/GS V, 143–4).

(3) This dichotomy between the NS (which explains nature) and the HS (which allow us to understand higher mental phenomena) originates with the discussion between German historians and the empiricist historian Henry Thomas Buckle in which Dilthey was involved more than three decades before he wrote the just quoted essay. In a review of Buckle’s History of Civilization in England from 1862, Dilthey wrote the following:

[Buckle] wants to transform history into an exact science, like natural history; he wants to demonstrate what is law-governed in historical events and thereby put himself in the position of predicting them. […] I express my own judgment on the matter succinctly by saying that I consider this basic idea as correct in the abstract, but that
because of the distinctiveness of the content of historical writing it can be useful only to a limited degree. Moreover, in his attempt to derive comprehensive conclusions from it Buckle is completely off the mark (SW IV, 262/GS XVI, 101, my emphasis).

This is to say, Dilthey’s rejection of EP originates with his rejection of Buckle’s attempt “to transform history into an exact science”. His appreciation of Buckle’s “basic idea” to be “correct, in the abstract” led to his approaches in the poetics and in the realism essay that both were informed by EXP and therefore had a natural scientific background. However, this could not change Dilthey’s overall assessment that any attempt to use the methods of the NS to concretely explain history is entirely hopeless. As soon as one studies the details of the development of the history of mankind, one can no longer make any fruitful use of EXP or any other method of the NS except for those cases that even Dilthey does not deny where we use the natural sciences as a means of Quellenkritik. (GS IV, 555-575) Thus, EP is no more and no less than the systematic misuse of EXP and the NS to (fully) explain history. The classical example for this misuse is Buckle who is mentioned in the 1894 essay only in passing (SW II, 138, 164/GS V, 163, 191). However, in the middle of the 1890s, Dilthey mainly addresses those varieties of this misuse that draw on recent developments in EXP. His main target here is psychophysical parallelism as introduced by Fechner and Münsterberg while he takes Wundt, James, Stumpf, and Sigwart to be rather representing DP (SW II, 139-143/GS V, 164-168).

(4) However, even in history as Dilthey understood it, the concrete part of developing “understanding” of the details of the historical process is by no means free of explanations and general propositions. In that regard the previously quoted statement, “Nature we explain, but psychic life we understand”, tends to be misleading because, for Dilthey, understanding the psychic life is based on explanations of some kind (Makkreel 2015, 157). Hermeneutics
and DP, as it will turn out in the next section, not only describes but also explains—although these explanations are very different from natural scientific explanations.

(B) Apart from these aspects of criticism in the first chapter of the 1894 essay that addresses the NS and EXP, there is also a second front on which Dilthey is trying to secure the HS from apparent misconceptions, namely, at the level of epistemology. According to Dilthey, epistemology leads to a misconception of the relationship between philosophy and the HS as soon as it “claims absolute independence […] from psychology.”

But it is apparent that the intellectual materials of epistemology cannot be properly connected without some idea of a psychic nexus as background. No sleight of hand of transcendental method, no magic word of the Kantian school can help make possible what is in itself impossible. The illusion that such a task can be accomplished rests ultimately on the fact that the epistemologist possesses this nexus in his own living consciousness and transports it from there into his theory. He presupposes it and makes use of it, but he does not control it (SW II, 124/GS V, 148–9).

The “psychic nexus” studied in the HS is neither to be grasped by the NS and EP nor by the apriorism of a (Neo-)Kantian epistemology. Rather, what is needed for both the HS and epistemology is what Dilthey calls DP. To be clear, Dilthey purports that the standpoint of DP is the transcendental standpoint of epistemology rather than the experimental standpoint of the hypothetico-deductive NS. However, for Dilthey, the transcendental itself becomes empirical in this situation. DP, therefore, is the psychological science of “transcendental experience”, or as Dilthey puts it in the 1894 essay, 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 is rather experienced” (SW II, 127/GS V, 152).
“Inference” and “postulation” are the features of the two misguided alternatives to DP that
Dilthey rejects, viz. aprioristic epistemology (which “infers” psychic life) and EP (which
“postulates” psychic life). The two rejected alternatives fail in that they move away from the
experiential core of the “psychic nexus”. In contrast, DP remains in the purview of this
experience. In other words, it is a specific aspect of private experience that is available to
everyone that builds the basis of DP whereas this mode of experience becomes ruled out by
both EP and aprioristic epistemology. This connects directly to Ebbinghaus’s second
argument, because DP leads to a variety of explanation in history which is entirely different
from explanation in the sense of the human sciences. In order to clarify this crucial point we
now move to a reassessment of the relationship between DP and hermeneutics in Dilthey’s
later work.

3. Descriptive psychology and hermeneutics: two sides of the same coin

At first glance, Dilthey’s writings on DP and on hermeneutics form two rather different
aspects of his work. There are papers such as the 1894 essay having a psychology focus but
hardly mention hermeneutics. There are other papers such as the 1900 essay “The Rise of
Hermeneutics” (SW IV, 235-260/GS V, 317-338) having a hermeneutics focus that hardly
mentions psychology. However, there are good reasons to believe that, for Dilthey,
descriptive psychology and hermeneutics ultimately became two different sides of the same
coin. Both disciplines are intended to be foundational tools for the HS, viz. they serve exactly
the same purpose. The only difference is that DP focuses on the psychic nexus in general:
“descriptive psychology [is] […] the description and analysis of a nexus that is originally and
always given as life itself.” (SW II, 127/GS V, 152) Hermeneutics, by contrast, connects that
very nexus with the sources in whom it only becomes visible: “We call understanding the
process in which from sensuously given objectifications of psychic life the latter comes to be known conceptually.” (SW IV, 251/GS V, 332) The terminological focus on either “hermeneutics” or “psychology” is the outcome of two quite different historical traditions to whom both narratives belong. In Dilthey, these two traditions finally merge and lead to one and the same foundational discipline for the HS. The most important document that demonstrates this convergence is Dilthey’s final major philosophical work, the Aufbau. Here, DP or “structural psychology” as it is then called, and hermeneutics explicitly become two different aspects of one and the same task of the study of “the world of human spirit as a productive nexus.” The two terms that identify DP/structural psychology and hermeneutics as two sides of the same problem are “lived experience” and “understanding”:

[The] system of the human sciences […] is based on the relationship between lived experience and understanding from which three main principles have emerged. Our knowledge of what is given in lived experience is extended through the interpretation of the objectifications of life, and this interpretation, in turn, is possible only on the basis of the subjective depth of lived experience. Likewise, the understanding of what is singular depends on the general knowledge inherent in it, which, in turn, presupposes understanding. Finally, the understanding of a part of the historical course of events can attain completeness only through relating this part to the whole, just as the universal-historical survey of the whole presupposes the understanding of the parts united in it. (SW III, 174/GS VII, 152)

The hermeneutic aspect of these investigations is obvious: We always talk about “objectifications of psychic life” that we try to understand, viz., we are doing hermeneutics in the HS. But the psychological aspect is no less obvious because we are doing exactly what DP is about, namely, to study lived experience. This peculiar nature of DP as being located between psychology and hermeneutics can be illustrated by means of the relationship between
DP/hermeneutics and (A) EXP as well as (B) more traditionally minded (continental) philosophy:

(A) It becomes obvious in Dilthey’s take on psychology/hermeneutics in the *Aufbau* what already was quite striking in the 1894 essay, namely, that what we do here is “[to explicate] constituents and their connections in terms of a single nexus that appears uniformly in all mature human psychic life.” (SW II, 127/GS V, 152) In 1910, Dilthey becomes even more explicit about the status of general propositions/explanations being involved here. Dilthey illustrates his view via an example of the understanding of a singular event, namely, the biography of Bismarck.

The available material consists of an extraordinary wealth of letters, documents, anecdotes, and reports about him. All this refers to the course of his life. But in order to understand what influenced this great statesman and what he achieved, the historian must expand the range of this material. […] Simply to recognize people, events and circumstances as belonging to this productive system, the historian will need some general propositions. Thus his understanding of Bismarck will also be based on them. (SW III, 163/GS VII, 142)

Dilthey goes on to mention several further aspects that allow the historian to understand Bismarck’s *on the basis of general propositions*. This leads Dilthey to a crucially important statement about “the dual relationship implicit in understanding”:

Understanding presupposes experience, but lived experience only becomes life-experience if understanding leads us from the narrowness and subjectivity of experiencing into the region of the whole and the general. Moreover, the understanding of an individual personality, to be complete, requires systematic knowledge, while systematic knowledge is equally dependent on the vivid grasping of the individual life-unit. (SW III, 164/GS VII, 143)
However, this peculiar form of explanation via general propositions is neatly distinguished from natural scientific explanations in two ways. First, the general propositions involved here are all general propositions of the HS rather than the NS. They do not involve physiology but are rather “historical knowledge” as Dilthey puts it. This is knowledge about typical behavior in certain situations and includes typical reactions of groups to certain events, etc. Roughly, the general propositions used here—rather than being naturally scientific—resemble and somewhat anticipate the general propositions to be found in recent social sciences. This particularly includes the specific holistic character of human scientific explanations, viz., the dependence of systematic knowledge “on the vivid grasping of the individual life-unit.” This, in turn, foreshadows the holism of “Neurath’s boat” that is characteristic of 20th century takes on the social sciences (Neurath 1981, 184). Second, although understanding of singular events involves general propositions at various levels, this does not change the fact that a historical event is typically singular. Thus, the Buckle syndrome can be ruled out here once and for all: The historian never uses general propositions that allow for a causal explanation of the singular event in the sense of deducing the entire event from a single general (natural) scientific law. To Dilthey—though the details of a historical event might be subject to general propositions and therefore might also be subject to certain kinds of historical experiments—the singular historical event in its totality absolutely cannot become subsumed under general laws and cannot become repeated. This opens the door for more specific human scientific explanations, laws, and experiments that clarify the context of an event. Such hypotheses are (a) not natural scientific because they do not provide a reduction to lower mental phenomena but only relate different higher mental phenomena with each other; (b) only partial because they only explain those aspects of an event that represent general social-historical phenomena; the entire event remains singular.
Having thusly drawn a demarcation line between DP/hermeneutics and EXP/NS, it is no less important to also demarcate Dilthey’s approach from certain developments in the so-called continental philosophy of the 20th century. To be sure, Dilthey’s enterprise is not entirely different from Husserl’s phenomenology because Husserl also provides a systematization of everyday phenomenal experience via what he calls (transcendental) “view of the essence” (Wesensschau) (Husserl 2009, ch. 1). However, Husserl insists that his ingenious method of “Wesensschau” allows us to uncover an eternal core, a hidden structure, that is devoid of all kinds of traces of everyday reasoning and empirical fact. In this case, Dilthey resembles the völkerpsychologische tradition from Lazarus and Steinthal up to Cohen. He assumes that what is present in everyday life is already all we can know about the essence of everyday objects though hermeneutics allows us to refine and systematize this knowledge in such a way that it first becomes scientific. Of course, we have to overcome personal temptations and feelings and try to be as neutral and objective as possible. However, this is again something that we already learn in everyday communication.

Action everywhere presupposes the understanding of other persons; much of our happiness as human beings derives from being able to feel the states of mind of others; the entire science of philology and history is based on the presupposition that such reunderstanding of what is singular can be raised to objectivity. (SW IV, 235/GS V, 317)

In other words, objective “reunderstanding of what is singular” is the basic assumption of the HS, but it is no less basic to the HS that the ability to understand objectively is something that belongs to everyday life and therefore does not need any “sleight of hand of transcendental method” or even phenomenology. The HS in the sense of Dilthey replaces the standpoint of transcendental apriorism with a standpoint of what one might call transcendent empiricalism:
While Husserl envisions a variety of phenomenal experience that entirely transcends all kinds of everyday knowledge, Dilthey, in the surroundings of the Aufbau, describes “higher forms of understanding” as always based on those “elementary forms of understanding” being developed in everyday communication (SW III, 228-234/GS VII, 207-213). It is the main characteristic of Dilthey’s conception of hermeneutics and DP that “higher forms of understanding” do not, as in the case of Husserl, add a certain miraculous ability of the phenomenological seer which transcends everyday knowledge but only refine the latter by means of systematical historical knowledge and the respective general propositions that first make this knowledge hermeneutically exploitable.

4. Ebbinghaus’s criticism revisited

Ebbinghaus was a psychologist who tried to develop experimental approaches to exactly those “higher mental phenomena” that were also treated by Dilthey’s DP. His 1885 book on memory (Ebbinghaus 2011) is considered a classic of the experimental psychology of higher mental phenomena. Note also that Ebbinghaus defended a variety of EXPs that were based on introspection and self-experiment. Recent EXP—even if it proceeds entirely without any physiological and neuro-scientific considerations—collects material only from such experimental subjects not identical with the experimenter. In contrast, Ebbinghaus’s psychology used the material that was collected by the experimenter himself (viz. Ebbinghaus) as its experimental source. Ebbinghaus’s method, however, unlike Dilthey’s conception of DP, is naturally scientific in two ways: (1) It uses an experimental setup that is based on repetitions of investigations under similar ideal conditions and makes these repetitive investigations comparable via certain quantitative measures such as the number of recollected syllables in his experiments on memory; and (2) It tries to reduce higher mental
phenomena to lower mental phenomena (Ebbinghaus 2011, 19-28). In these respects, Ebbinghaus clearly belongs to the same psychological tradition as thought and other varieties of psychology that tried to be both experimental and focused on the mental world of inner experience (Kusch 1999, ch. 2). Ebbinghaus, in other words, is developing a branch of EXP, though one that is highly non-standard versus recent psychological practice.

In contrast, Dilthey’s DP is not using an experimental psychological setup in this sense at all. DP is not an instance of EXP but is rather an early variety or anticipation of modern social science. Thus, there is still a very important difference between explanations in the sense of Ebbinghaus/EXP and explanations in the sense of Dilthey/DP. This is despite the fact that Ebbinghaus correctly objects against Dilthey that the latter uses explanations by himself after firstly rejecting them in his 1894 essay. For Ebbinghaus and EXP, an explanation must always be based on general propositions that reduce the entire (higher) mental phenomenon in question to lower mental phenomena. However, these exact general propositions are what Dilthey denies being useful for concrete takes on historical events. Therefore, it is obvious that Dilthey effectively rejects EP without contradicting himself; in contrast, Ebbinghaus erroneously sees a contradiction because of his failure to see that there are two different varieties of explanation at work here. This is to say, Ebbinghaus’s second argument against Dilthey—though clearly exposing a bulkiness of Dilthey’s essay—ultimately rests on a sheer misunderstanding. Similarly, Ebbinghaus’s first argument, namely, that Dilthey rejects EXP as a whole, is based on an impatient reading of Dilthey that ignores key aspects of his work. Ebbinghaus fails to see all these points in Dilthey where the latter is explicitly appreciating EXP as being useful to the HS and philosophy.

Having thusly disentangled Ebbinghaus’s criticism, we can wrap up the results of this paper in the following way. Dilthey’s 1894 essay draws an a fortiori correct but also vastly misleading picture of his overall views of the relationship between psychology, the human sciences, and
philosophy. Dilthey’s 1894 account becomes graspable only as soon as one reads it against the background of his earlier writings on poetics, realism, and the Buckle dispute. Ebbinghaus however certainly ignored these earlier aspects of Dilthey’s work and blew to pieces the 1894 essay with a method that combines literal reading and ignorance of the background. In this manner, Dilthey’s muddy rhetoric on “hypotheses” and allegedly non-explanative understanding opened the door for Ebbinghaus to accuse him of (a) rejecting EXP as a whole while at the same time (b) proposing DP as an alternative without recognizing that DP in crucial respects converges with the rejected method of EP. Dilthey, to be sure, rejected EXP and all kinds of natural scientific explanations as a means for foundation of the HS. Despite this rejection, however, Dilthey still regarded what we called partial human scientific explanations to be indispensable parts of the enterprise of historical understanding and therefore adopted a hypothetico-deductive standpoint in the HS. Moreover, apart from rejecting EXP as a foundational means for the HS, Dilthey also appreciates EXP at various other levels. This includes (a) the importance of EXP as a means for realism and philosophy of perception and (b) abstract theories about the relationship between higher and lower mental phenomena as developed in the context of Dilthey’s poetics. This overall assessment shows that Dilthey is not an empiricist or positivist in the classical sense because he rejects EXP as a foundational means for the human sciences; however, he also defends an empiricism of a non-standard form that involves partial human scientific explanations as well as explicit use of EXP in various meta-branches of the human sciences and philosophy (Damböck 2017, 74-92; Damböck 2012, 154-163).

5. References


1 See (Dilthey 1894). This paper and other works by Dilthey will be quoted here from the respective volumes of *Gesammelte Schriften* (Dilthey 1914ff) following the usual (GS volume, pages) format. The translations are taken from *Selected Works* (Dilthey 1985, 1989, 1996, 2002, 2010). The translation in SW is added to the GS-signature, following the format (SW volume, pages).

ii See (Ebbinghaus 1896). The letter is quoted from (Dilthey 2015, 562), my translation. On the dispute between Dilthey and Ebbinghaus, see (Rodi 2003, 173-183; Galliker 2010; Lessing 2015, 147-166; Gerhardt, Mehring, and Rindert 1999, 163-177). There is an important biographical background to the dispute that becomes highlighted in the before-quoted chapters of Rodi and Gerhardt et al. Ebbinghaus was a colleague of Dilthey in Berlin for a decade, and they had frequently discussed psychological and philosophical questions. In 1894, after Carl Stumpf’s call to Berlin as a successor of Eduard Zeller, Ebbinghaus had to leave the University of Berlin and move to the less renowned University of Wroclaw. Dilthey was partly responsible for this career break because he engaged himself against Ebbinghaus and in favor of Stumpf, “in order to avoid an entire natural scientific radicalization of philosophy” in Berlin”, as Dilthey once wrote to Yorck von Wartenburg (Rodi 2003, 174; Gerhardt, Mehring, and Rindert 1999, 166f).

iii See (SW II, 207-284/GS V, 237-316) in which both the 1895 version and the published version from 1896 can be reconstructed.

iv Cf. (Boring 1957) who does not even mention Dilthey and Cohen and mentions Steinthal and Lazarus only once in passing (p. 261). Similarly, (Brett 1921) does not mention Dilthey and Cohen at all, and Steinthal and Lazarus are mentioned only in passing (p. 286). This tendency continues also in recent textbooks of the history of psychology. Cf. (Schultz and Schultz 2000; Hergenhahn and Henley 2013), where Dilthey, Cohen, Lazarus and Steinthal are not mentioned at all.

v The present account is related in various respects to (Kinzel 2018). I share Kinzel’s take on the role of DP as a foundational tool for the HS. I also share her general views on the continuities between DP and hermeneutics and her historical assessment of the relationship between Dilthey and contemporary critics such as Husserl and Rickert. The difference between Kinzel’s approach and the present one probably lies in a slightly different positioning of Dilthey, in the spectrum toward positivism. For example, I highlight the explanatory nature of DP and hermeneutics here in a way that is not present in Kinzel. I also stress similarities between Dilthey’s poetics and EXP which cannot be found in Kinzel. In general, I probably hold there being a stronger continuity between
Dilthey and empiricism than Kinzel does (cf. her corresponding criticism of my views in footnote 5 of her paper).

vi This picture also relates to the more general claim that HS and NS, rather than being entirely separate and isolated scientific realms, are somewhat continuous. Cf. (Hamid 2016; Damböck 2017, 92-95).

vii The highly illustrative term “transcendental experience” is coined by Dilthey later in the introductory passages of the 1895 essay that criticizes Windelband. See (SW II, 217/GS V, 247).

viii Note also that Neurath himself has been influenced by 19th hermeneutics. Cf. (Uebel 2019; Damböck forthcoming).