

# Wilhelm Dilthey and Rudolf Carnap on the Foundation of the Humanities

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\*[http://homepage.univie.ac.at/christian.damboeck/  
dilthey\\_carnap\\_project/index.html](http://homepage.univie.ac.at/christian.damboeck/dilthey_carnap_project/index.html)

# Overview

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# 1. The received view on Dilthey's and Carnap's role for the foundation of the humanities

- There are two traditions in 20th century humanities (and corresponding philosophies)
- Firstly, the hermeneutic tradition (HT) whose foundation is represented by philosophers such as Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, Adorno, Habermas, Foucault and Derrida
- Secondly, the analytic (positivist, scientific) tradition (ST) whose foundation is represented by philosophers such as Russell, Carnap, Quine, Davidson, Kripke, (i.e., by the philosophers of the analytic tradition)

# 1. The roots of HT

- HT is rooted in the Continental European philosophical tradition and can be traced back to the German Idealists.
- The very foundation of HT starts in the second half of the 19th century
- Key figures are the neo-Kantians (e.g., Rickert or Cassirer) and, especially, Dilthey whose *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (here: *Introduction*) is sort of an early manifesto of HT

# 1. The role of Dilthey

- Dilthey's conception in *Introduction* is a hermeneutic one, pretty much in the sense of later conceptions in Heidegger, Gadamer or Derrida
- Dilthey proposes an approach to the humanities that is not connected to the natural sciences
- Dilthey's foundation of HT proposes a certain (aprioristic) method that works totally independent from the empirical approaches of the special sciences as rooted in physics

# 1. The roots of ST

- ST is rooted in the empiricist and positivist tradition in philosophy and can be traced back to philosophers such as Hume, Comte, Mill, Mach, and Russell
- The very foundation of ST starts with the logical empiricist conception of the Vienna Circle
- Carnap's writings, in particular, are main manifestos of ST, proposing a variety of the humanities that is exclusively based on empirical data and physical laws

# 1. Challenging the „received view“

- The „received view“ just described is not completely false, to be sure
- There can be no doubt that HT and ST both exist (in the 20th century) as completely isolated realms of research
- And it is also quite obvious that Dilthey and Carnap play an important role as leading figures of the respective tradition
- However, as we will show now, these foundational myths of HT and ST can work only because they are based on flawed accounts of the philosophies of Dilthey and Carnap (and, as a consequence of this, of the historical development of the humanities as a whole)



## 2. The historical background of Dilthey's *Introduction*

- There are a number of philosophers in the 19th century German philosophy scene who sharply criticize Kant and the German Idealists and try to replace their aprioristic story with an empirical account
- However, „German empiricists“ such as Beneke, Trendelenburg, Lazarus, Wundt, or Dilthey do not just adopt the positivist and empiricist stories of Comte or Mill
- Rather, they propose to develop an empirical understanding of exactly that kind of philosophical realm that was developed by Kant, Hegel, Fichte and Schelling

### 3. Some crucial ideas of *Introduction*

- The humanities are based on a „critique of historical reason“, i.e., on a historization and empirization of what Kant called „transcendental“
- The method that the humanities need for such a historical approach is a „descriptive psychology“ which develops „descriptions“ of inner experiences rather than external (neuro-)scientific explanations
- However, descriptive psychology and scientific psychology are complementary; the former is based on the latter and is certainly not an anti-thesis to it
- Cf. also Wundt’s introspective approach to experimental psychology (and even gestalt-psychology etc.)

# 3. Dilthey's humanities are empirical

- The upshot is that Dilthey's conception of the humanities rejects apriorisms of all kinds
- Thus, the modern conceptions of phenomenology, hermeneutics, deconstruction, etc. are totally at odds with Dilthey's approach, because they are all based on reasoning a priori („beyond“ the realm of the natural sciences)
- As a consequence of this, it is by no means surprising that philosophers such as Heidegger, Gadamer and Habermas who picked up Dilthey in their work appreciated the latter in a rather ambivalent way and rejected his „positivist“ and/or „psychologist“ attitude

“When Kant undertook a pure analysis of the subject and its scientific knowledge with the intention of solving the problem definitely, he divorced his philosophical analysis from the positive human sciences. Once one recognizes that these problems are connected with those of comparative grammar, mythology, and cultural history, then the task of philosophy cannot be distinguished from that of the positive science of history either by its method or by its means, or even fully by its object. The barrier between philosophy and the positive sciences collapses, just as it could not be upheld between philosophy and the principles of natural science. It derives from the unavoidable narrowness of human nature, which favors one sort of means and problems over another, but need no longer be seen to reside in any difference regarding [philosophy’s] overall object, method, or means. This suggests a solution to the problem of the unlimited progress of positive knowledge: its limits are only those of the epoch in which we live; there is no absolute philosophy.” Dilthey (1989, 279)

## 4. The historical background of Carnap's *Aufbau*

- Before Rudolf Carnap went to Vienna (in 1927) and became the key philosophical figure of the Vienna Circle (cf. his *Logical Syntax of Language* from 1934) he wrote his first main philosophical book *The Logical Structure of the World (Aufbau)*
- The *Aufbau* was not (or not mainly) a product of discussions in the Vienna Circle but rather of an intellectual circle that was formed by Carnap during the time of his studies in Jena and Freiburg

# 4. The intellectual circle in Jena and Freiburg

- Key figures of that intellectual circle were the philosopher Herman Nohl (a pupil of Dilthey) and some of his students (who all belong to the Dilthey school in some sense): Hans Freyer, Wilhelm Flitner, and Franz Roh
- Carnap developed main parts of the *Aufbau* in the context of discussions of this intellectual circle
- Moreover, Carnap studied in Jena and Freiburg not only with Nohl and Gottlob Frege, but also with the neo-Kantian philosophers Heinrich Rickert, Jonas Cohn, and Bruno Bauch
- Thus, there are at least four\* lines of influence that play an important role for the *Aufbau*: Frege, Russell (i.e., the *Principia Mathematica*), the neo-Kantians, and the Dilthey-school

\* Actually, there are much more influences (to be considered in a workshop in Munich 2013)

# 5. The role of the humanities in the *Aufbau*

- The „logical structure of the world“ is uncovered by means of a „phenomenological basis“, i.e., the portions of „inner experiences“ of a certain individual I
- On this basis Carnap construes (1) the subjective world of I, (2) the physical world, as accessible via I, (3) the subjective worlds of other individuals as accessible via I, and (4) the world of intersubjective and mental objects („Geistige Gegenstände“) with the inclusion of values as accessible via I

## 5. Carnap's humanities are empirical and „mental“ („geistig“)

- Astonishingly enough, Carnap's humanities share two crucial features of Dilthey's conception (rather than being an instance of ST)
- „Mental objects“ are empirical, in exactly that sense in which Dilthey's world of the „historized reason“ is empirical (i.e., the empiricism of Carnap is a „German“ empiricism rather than a „British“ or „French“ one)
- Moreover, „mental objects“, in the *Aufbau*, are really mental, i.e., instances of an „objective spirit“, in the sense of Lazarus, Dilthey, and Freyer



„For philosophy, the most important types of objects, outside of the physical and the psychological ones, are the ,*mental objects*‘ [„geistige Gegenstände‘] in the sense of the ,cultural‘, ,historical‘, ,sociological‘ objects. They belong in the objective domain of the humanities [„Geisteswissenschaften‘] and with respect to the name of these sciences it appears to be appropriate to call them ,mental‘ objects. [...] Among the mental objects we count individual incidents and large scale occurrences, sociological groups, institutions, movements in all areas of culture, and also properties and relations of such processes and entities.

*The autonomy of the object type of the mental was not sufficiently appreciated in 19th Century philosophy. [sic!] The reason for this is that epistemological and logical investigations tended to confine their attention predominantly to physics and psychology as paradigmatic subject matter areas. Only the more recent philosophy of history (since Dilthey) has called attention to the methodological and object-theoretical peculiarities of the area of the humanities.“* *Aufbau*, §23

# 6. Conclusions

- The most astonishing feature of Dilthey's *Introduction* and Carnap's *Aufbau* is that HT and ST are by no means separated here
- Though the *Introduction* indeed can be seen as an early example of HT (since its main topic are mental objects and not physical objects) its conception is certainly compatible with a scientific approach
- Though the *Aufbau* indeed can be seen as an early example of ST (since its main objective are physical objects and a logical construction of the physical world) its conception is certainly compatible with an approach in the sense of *Introduction*

# 6. Two options

- Thus, we have essentially two options here of how to interpret the aforementioned facts
- First, we may see Dilthey and the early Carnap as imperfect and immature examples of HT and ST and demand for a respective correction of the flaws of these approaches that essentially let us arrive at purified versions of HT and ST
- Second, we may decide to go in the opposite direction and take Dilthey and Carnap as starting points for a criticism of the purified versions of HT and ST and for a reconciliation between these two traditions

It is the aim of the present research project\* to show that the second option is the much more plausible and interesting one

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Thank you